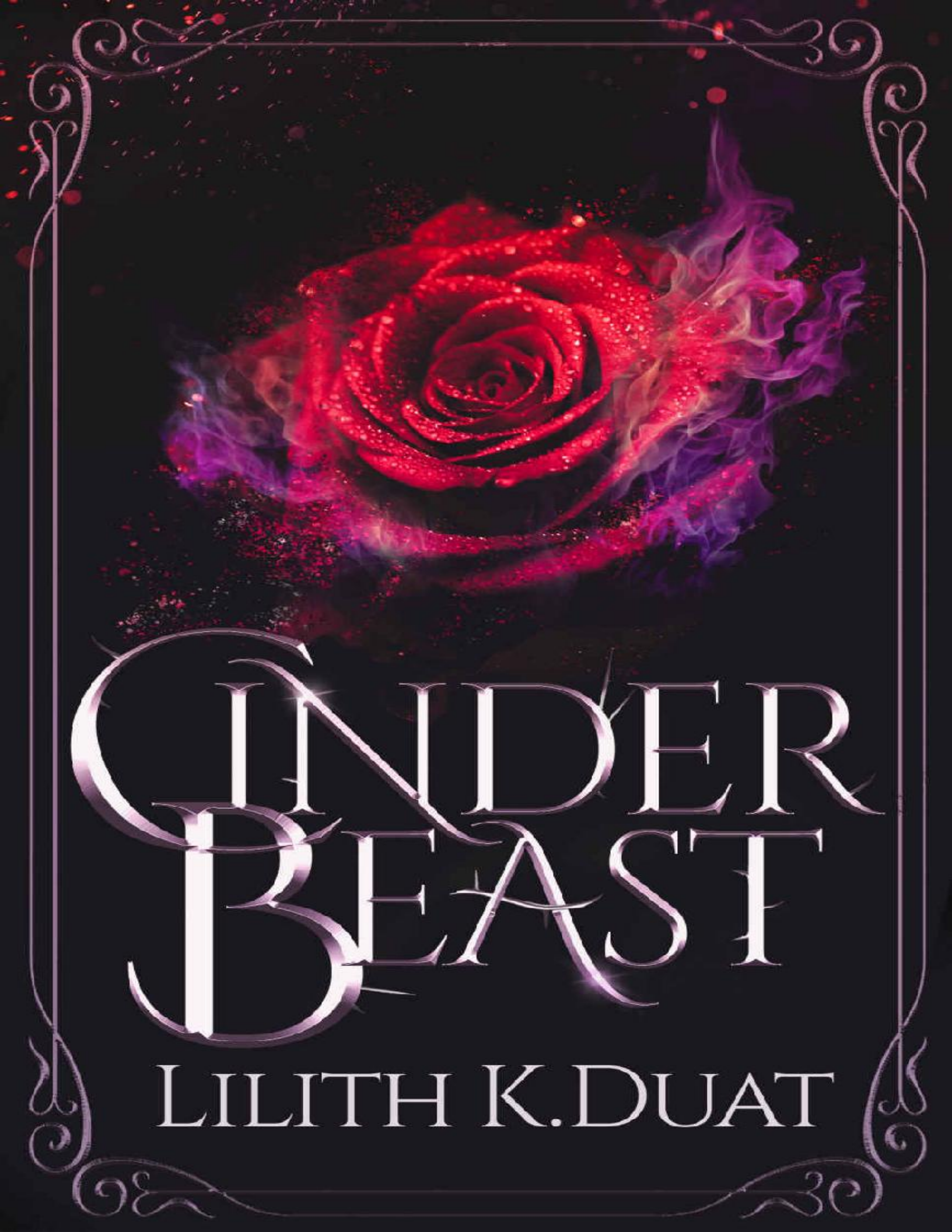
CINDER
BEAST
LILITH K.DUAT

# CINDERBEAST

Lilith K. Duat

Broken Wings Media

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Printed in Canada

Kindle Edition - First Printing, 2023

ASIN: B0BVHH6QQL

Broken Wings Media brokenwingsmedia.com | Twitter.com/BWMTweet

Cover design by Marie MacKay.

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Thank You for Reading

Also By Lilith K. Duat

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# A Message from the Author

LILITH K. DUAT BELIEVES in having a good time. If you, the reader, want to go on a fun journey without being spoiled, please read on.

If you wish to be informed, and to know what sort of troubling material, kinks and the heat level presented in this book, please **click here** for a complete list of content.

We want everyone in possession of this story, and all of Lilith's books, to be happy, safe, comfortable, and have a pleasurable experience.

Please, sit back and enjoy yourselves.

For all the Ellys out there, I hope you find your Thorns…

…Whoever that might be.

# ONE

BEFORE SHE HAD EVEN opened her eyes, Elly had to force away the encroaching tears.

“No.” A cloud of her breath chased the single word, then dissipated. She balled herself up tighter under the blanket that she had crocheted for herself. “I don’t want to.”

The same intrusive thoughts that she conjured up first thing every morning for the last thirteen years.

Why couldn’t she just go to sleep and never wake up again?

She opened her eyes and saw almost nothing. There was no light in the back of the root cellar except for the glow from the candles and oil lamps that shone through the cracks in the floorboards above.

Elly liked the dark. It was safe. Cold was merely something she had acclimated to. She exhaled and another cloud escaped her lips.

She got out of bed, and smoothed out her blanket. From there she commenced with her morning routine. She brushed out her long black hair and twisted it into a bun at the nape of her neck, then wrapped her breasts

tightly in a length of wide bandages. Madame Fiona had told her that they were too large, too obscene and they would distract the patrons. Once the bandages were secure, Elly dressed in her work uniform; a black peasant-styled dress and white pinafore that was both a little too tight and a little too loose in all the wrong places.

The dress had belonged to her mother, and had been the most beautiful shade of sapphire blue, but over time it had become worn, and the beautiful lines that highlighted her body were mocked and nitpicked. Elly dyed it black to cover the wear, using ash and soot, quill ink and charcoal from the hearth and ovens. She sewed and re-sewn the hem and seams, adding and removing fabric over time to hide more and more and more of her body in its darkness. At least the pinafore was clean, white and presented forth order and tidiness.

She fixed the black cowl around her shoulders and pulled the hood over her head so that none of the guests would be disgusted by the scars, like climbing ivy, crawling up her right cheek. She slipped a foot into a work slipper and her toes touched something warm and fuzzy. Quickly Elly pulled back her foot and picked up the slipper.

“Walter, come out of there.” She upended the shoe and out tumbled a sleek spotted rat. He perched on her palm, and Elly carefully set him onto the floor.

“Go on, now. Be careful.” She heard the rodent scurry away into the darkness.

Elly crept out of the root cellar and into the kitchen, where she would spend most of her morning.

With a sigh, Elly began to prepare the batter for crepes, and when it was satisfactorily silky and without lumps she passed the bowl to Greta, the

house chef and head of the kitchen. Greta ladeled it onto the hot griddle. Elly worked prep, and prep only.

She set about cutting fruit into elaborate rosebuds, and saved the rinds and stems wrapped in a cloth and stuffed in the pocket of her pinafore. She had use for the scraps.

Once breakfast was cooked and plated, Elly carried the plates to the dumbwaiter.

“Dumbwaiter’s stuck between floors,” said Greta. “Gotta carry it up by hand.”

“Again?” Elly groaned as she put the three dishes onto a large tray, and covered each one with a silver cloche so the meal would keep warm for the journey. Both hands holding the tray, she carefully pushed the swinging door open with her back, and walked out of the kitchen.

The master bedroom was on the third floor of the manor, and that was where step-mother Fiona resided. Her daughters, Madeline and Adaline, also resided on the third floor. It was quite a walk from the kitchens to the master suites.

Elly took the grand palatial stairs up to the second floor and she took a brief rest at the landing. She stared at the wall that was papered in red with a trellis design in a deeper red. It looked so empty now. She could make out the faint trace of paintings that used to hang on the wall. Her mother, her father, herself as a happy child. They had all been removed by Fiona.

Her arms shook, the weight of the tray deceptively heavy. She continued up the steps and was near the top when she misjudged the landing. Elly stumbled and the sugar bowl for the tea slid to the left. Horrified that it would spill, Elly put a hand over it. This caused the tray to list to the side and teeter upward. The platters dropped from under the domes and there

was a cascade of eggs and crepes and jam. Fine dishware and delicate drink ware smashed on the marble and shattered into hundreds of shards. An avalanche of fresh fruit tumbled down the stairs and the fine carpet was painted with berry juice and preserves. The silver domes rang like bells as they rolled to a stop.

There was no point in shedding tears, or wishing away this failure. Confronting reality was something Elly excelled at. With the sound of the silver cloches still humming in the air, she walked down the steps and began to gather the broken pieces with one hand. She curled the other hand into a fist and beat it against her chest.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Giving herself punishment was preferable to any beatings Madame Fiona might give out.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

Elly's bound breasts made the ache worse because there was so little give. The impact was firm and unbidden.

She knelt on the landing and plucked fractured shards of glass and delicate porcelain from the carpet and tossed them onto the tray. She picked out an edged crescent of crystal from a drinking glass that ended in a stark, wounding point. Elly stared at it, and imagined digging it into the meat of her wrist and dragging it up the flesh of her arm; of cutting her scars in half and the fire pattern of them be doused with her warm red blood. She imagined the crimson stream falling down the steps and mixing with the spilled brown sugar and the white cream and lapping like waves along a shore made of crepes.

A few steps above, a prim shoe crushed a blackberry into the carpet. Elly forced herself not to react, what difference would it make?

“Mother wants to see you.” Madeline said. At her shoulder her twin Adaline tittered and giggled.

“Immediately,” Adaline added, drawing out the word with a smug smile and narrow eyes.

Madeline turned on her toe, further grinding the berry into the carpet, and returned up the steps, arm in arm with her sister. Both girls were careful to avoid any mess.

Elly hated entering the bedroom of Fiona L’argent. It was needlessly large, even for a master chamber. It always smelled of overly sweet perfumes. The air felt moist with droplets of flowery mist that never seemed to evaporate.

Fiona’s bed curtains were already pulled back and tied to the canopy posts. Her pillows were fluffed and she sat up in bed. The woman watched Elly with shrewd eyes the colour of unloved iron.

Elly opened the drapes and let the morning into the dark chambers. In the sunlight, tiny motes of cosmetic powder floated about in the room. The root cellar might have been practically underground, devoid of light, with a hard packed earth for the floor, but Madame Fiona L’argent’s boudoir was far more tomb-like.

“I heard quite a racket,” Fiona said, and Elly had to keep herself from flinching. “Care to explain what that was?”

Elly stared out the window at the town below their hill, and watched as it began to come alive. The fishmonger and baker setting their produce out for the day. The ring of the smith’s hammer against the anvil as he started

making new wares. The high pitched voices of homeless boys trying to sell gossip or shine shoes. How Elly longed to be out there.

“Elody!”

The sudden bark of her name startled Elly and she turned to Fiona. “I was carrying up breakfast,” she said in a rush. “and my foot slipped, and I dropped it.”

“Why not use the dumbwaiter, you foolish girl?”

“It was stuck, Madame.”

Fiona’s starkly plucked brow arched over the cold eye. “Stuck?”

“Between floors, Madame.”

Fiona squared her shoulders and raised her chin, the posture she adopted for whenever she was feeling indignant. “So like an infant you threw the meal around in a fit of frustration.”

“The dumbwaiter was stuck,” Elly said again.

Fiona raised a hand. “I don’t want to hear your excuses, girl!”

It was an explanation, not an excuse, but Elly knew better than to argue. She swallowed her protests and lowered her gaze to the toes of her slippers. “Yes, Madame.”

In the following silence, Elly watched the ambient powder puff dust dance in the rays of the sun.

“Well?” Madame Fiona snapped. “Where is breakfast?”

Elly looked back at her stepmother. “I’ve yet to finish cleaning up the mess.”

“*Your* mess,“ Fiona said. “You haven’t done that yet? It’s been ages.”

Had it really? It felt like any other morning routine to Elly. Had she sat so long in a nest of smashed fruits and broken glass, in contemplation of

ending her life? It seemed to her only a few seconds but perhaps she spent whole minutes in the seductive fantasy.

With a sigh, Fiona gestured to her hearth. “Then fill the basin with hot water so that I may wash my face.”

As soon as Elly looked at the fireplace, her eyes filled with tears. Someone had already stoked the fire and flames half a foot high licked the iron kettle that hung within. Unlike the kitchen with its swinging arms allowing for easy access to putting things over the fire, this bedroom only had a bolted hook at the back of the fireplace, requiring one to lean close to the dancing fire. Elly stared as embers winked like furious stars in the night sky.

“Please, Madame...”

The scars that ran up the left side of her body itched and burned. Throughout her decade of servitude, Elly had disciplined herself to the point where she nearly always felt apathy. Numbness. She had convinced her soul to die. Sleep. But her body still responded to things in a way she would never be able to control.

“You know I can’t…” her voice faded, like it were air sucked out of a room. There was a pop, some sparks shot upward. Elly jumped and the tears flowed down her dirty face.

“Oh, for heaven sake!” Frustrated, Fiona threw her comforter off and swung her legs out of the bed. “Must I do everything myself?”

As she busied about preparing to wash, she flung orders: “Have the kitchen serve another breakfast for my daughters and I. Tell them we will eat in the dining hall. That’s on the first floor, do you think you can manage?” She patted her face with a small towel. “Clean up the steps

before we open tonight and guests arrive. Make sure they're spotless. I want not a crumb on the carpet. Am I clear?"

Elly wiped the tears from her cheeks, further smudging the root cellar dust and flour across her face. "Yes, Madame. Completely. Thank you, Madame."

As Elly turned to go, Madame Fiona said, "Oh, and go out to the horse troughs and wash your face. You look a fright."

Elly scowled. Finally, Madame Fiona allowed her to leave the icy chambers.

# TWO

ELLY AND TWO OTHER members of the kitchen staff set out fresh breakfast platters for the three women. The two staff left, but Elly was tasked with standing in the corner and waiting for further instruction.

She had to fight the urge to outwardly show her impatience. The longer the mess on the steps remained, the more difficult it would be to clean. She could practically *feel* the stains setting into the weave.

Instead, she focused on being perfectly still and silent. Just as she had been every family meal for the past thirteen years.

It wasn't long after father passed on that they made Elly stand aside and wait while the three of them dined. She was always hungry and her mouth would water. She would swallow down her saliva until one morning Adaline had said she was being too noisy and Madeline said she was gross.

From then on Elly stood by, pools of saliva flooding her tongue until it overflowed and slowly trickled its way down her throat. Elly never coughed, never choked. She merely repressed her nature.

“More juice,” Madeline pointed to her goblet with her knife, greasy cheeks puffed out with a full bite.

Elly stepped forward and poured the orange juice into the glass goblet, then picked up one of Fiona’s empty plates and placed it on a nearby trolly.

A butler entered, and on his fingers he balanced a silver letter tray. He stopped at Fiona’s side and she selected one of the sealed letters. She sighed as she opened it. “It must be our invitations to the prince’s annual ball. How tiresome.”

Fiona pulled the letter from the envelope and read the paper. “Oh. Oh, my.”

“What is it, mother?” Adaline asked.

“Yes, tell us, mother,” Madeline said.

“This year, the ball is to have a special guest, Faye LaFaye, and the prince has asked for us to host her for the duration.”

Adaline scoffed. “This isn’t a hotel.”

Madeline agreed. “Yes, we’re not a charity.”

“Do you not see, my treasures?” Fiona said as she pulled a few more slips of paper from the envelope. The invitations. “Faye’s presence will bring a great deal of business to the brothel.”

The twins instantly changed their tune.

“Oh, mother, we are so lucky!” said Madeline.

“Yes, this is wonderful news!” said Adaline.

“You.” Madame Fiona looked directly at Elly. “See that the master guest suite is impeccable. She arrives in the morning.” She dropped the letter on the tray and rose to her feet, leaving breakfast only half-eaten. “Come my little dolls, we must go shopping for new dresses.”

Again, she angled her gaze on Elly. “Make yourself useful and clean the table.” Then, she and her daughters whisked out of the room, leaving Elly alone with an abandoned and wasted feast.

Elly peered out the door and saw nobody. With the quickness of a bird, she snatched a sticky bun from the platter. She tore it in half and bit into a chunk. She chewed quickly and swallowed, then stuffed the rest in her mouth. She poured some cold milk into Adaline’s unused goblet and drank it down. She rolled up a crepe and pushed it into her mouth and sucked it down her throat without chewing. She plucked a peach up and dropped it in the pocket of her pinafore, then a banana, followed by an apple.

She reached for a bread roll when she spotted the envelope and the seal. She picked it up and traced her finger against the imprint in the hardened wax; half a wolf’s head, and a stemmed and thorny rose on the other side. This had been inside the royal manor, and it would probably be the closest Elly would ever get to visiting.

Elly folded the envelope and tucked it in the pocket of her pinafore with her stolen food. Wordlessly, she set about clearing the breakfast dishes.

It took nearly two hours to clean the mess from the stairs. Elly scrubbed pulp and juice from the carpet with a brush and soap and hot water. After all her work it was much improved but still imperfect.

She sat back on her knees and rubbed the sweat from her forehead. She stared at the dark, wet spot in the carpeted landing when an idea came to her.

Elly hurried to the attic and pulled down the swinging step ladder. She climbed up and padded along the floorboards. She paused by the window, where a dress form stood in the sunlight streaming in. The dress was not even half-finished, and made from an old velvet curtain that had a horrible red wine stain and Fiona had told Elly to get rid of. She took a moment to run her fingers along the soft skirt, indulging in the plush texture of the pricy fabric.

“I’ll come back soon,” Elly whispered to the garment, then got back to her quest.

She found the old Persian rug rolled up and leaning upright against a wall.

It was hard work getting the rug from the attic to the landing at the centre of the estate. It might as well have been a log made of fine silk. Madeline and Adaline giggled and watched Elly drag the rug around the house.

She shoved the rug down the stairway and it slid down to the landing and rolled to a stop. She came down, lined the rug up, and unrolled it over the stain. It covered it perfectly. Elly sat on the steps to catch her breath.

“That doesn’t belong there.” Fiona loomed over the bannister, each of her daughters flanking her.

“I think it looks good,” Elly said. “It was just doing nothing but taking up space otherwise.”

“Just like you,” Adaline said, the comment trailed by Madeline’s chilly laughter.

Elly remained silent. It wasn’t worth arguing.

# THREE

THIS USED TO BE her home, the estate she grew up in, so there was very much a part of her that wanted to take pride in how it looked. But it didn't feel like her home any longer. It was *Fiona's*, the most opulent brothel in all the land. It had a reputation of being a delight to the senses; a place for fun, food, and fucking. Fiona was the Madame and her daughters were off limits of course, except for perhaps the occasional vocal performance or piano recital. Their abilities had been drilled into them because Fiona demanded perfection. They were note perfect, like automatons.

Mercifully, Elly had not been turned out, though often Fiona had hinted that she might let the more cruel customers sample her. It never happened though. Elly has never known the touch of a lover. Instead, she stayed out of sight so as to not disturb the guests. One look at her, Fiona had once told her, and the men's dicks would be limper than after a whole bottle of whisky. That would be terrible for business.

Finally, after hours of dishes, dusting, polishing, bed making and sweeping, Elly was able to take some time for herself. She stole away to the

attic and sat on a steamer trunk that rested under the single attic window to enjoy her purloined meal. As she bit into the crisp apple, she studied the seal on the envelope. She traced the imprint with her calloused finger. Then, she pressed the seal to her soft wrist hard enough that her skin moulded to the brand and left an impression on her wrist. To her surprise, the wax didn't soften against her warm skin, and held firm as bone.

She put her food aside, stood up, and opened the trunk. She exhaled and a sad smile curved her lips at the sight of the objects within.

"Hello, mother."

She reached in and picked up the little oak jewelry box set with pearl inlay. She handled the box carefully, and closed the trunk to place it on top. Opening the small box, Elly fingered through the silver and gold treasures until she found a simple round pendant made of glass and silver. Elly imagined that her mother once had plans to put a lock of baby hair in it from when Elly was an infant, but her mother never had the chance.

Elly opened the pendant and placed the seal inside. She closed it with a snap, and strung one of her mother's black hair ribbons through the loop. She tied it tight in a little knot so that the charm didn't slip around. From there, Elly paused. She couldn't wear the choker around her neck because there would be no way to hide it from the staff or Fiona and her daughters. But, Elly didn't want to be apart from it. In a burst of inspiration she pulled up the skirt of her work dress until her leg was exposed to mid-thigh. She wrapped the silky ribbon twice around her thigh, and tied it with a small, sweet bow. It reminded her of the garters the working girls wore. She pulled up her stockings to further secure her special little secret. Even muted and dulled by her thin stockings, the light from the setting sun made the silver trim blaze like white fire.

She paused then opened the locket and once more traced the emblem pressed into the wax with her finger, gazing into the eye of the wolf. She snapped the locket shut after a moment and tucked it back under her stocking.

She allowed her fingertips to journey up the flesh of her inner thigh, until her hand disappeared under the layers of her skirt. She cradled herself with her palm, cringing a little at the curly bush that she hadn't had a chance to groom. She brushed the hair back and with her middle finger, gently pet at the small button of pleasure nested above her opening. She rubbed it softly, her fingertip sliding up and down and her gaze focused on the beast at her thigh.

Elly brought her hand to mouth and drew her tongue along her digits to get them nice and slick with her saliva. Once they were dripping, she dipped her hand back to her sex and rubbed little circles against her clitoris that was growing more and more sensitive by the second. She rubbed harder, and faster, the growing pleasure giving way to a raw ache as she went too hard, and too fast. Elly knew slow and steady was the way to go, but she was eager to find her release, just a brief moment of mindless joy, but she didn't have the patience nor the time for slow, gradual self-seduction. She just had to get through the thorny patch of rawness, then the pleasure would consume her.

She could start to feel it now: the tremble in her thighs, the tingle in her hips, the stiffness of her nipples and the prickle on her skin. She was taking in large breaths of air, her back was arching off the steamer trunk.

The bell rang and her pleasure was flooded over and ruined by the hot, bitter sear of anxiety.

She had been summoned.

# FOUR

THE NEXT MORNING, ELLY was on the second floor balcony, shaking out a table runner when an approaching carriage caught her eye. It was traveling up the winding cobblestone path to the brothel. It was black, no, a very deep purple, with fringe and bells who's sweet sound grew louder the closer they came. Two smart looking black horses pulled the carriage, their onyx coats shining.

Faye had arrived.

Elly quickly pulled the table runner back into the room, folded it and placed it inside the linen cupboard. There wasn't much time until Faye would ring the bell. Elly quickly took a mental note, and checked off everything she could think. The floors were mopped and waxed, the fixtures and window dressings dusted, the guest bed made. Was she forgetting anything?

The bell. The low, sonorous sound that filled the estate, that could be heard from every corner of the house. It rang. Elly hurried to the kitchen, where she intended to remain out of sight but there, on the counter was

Faye's welcome basket, incomplete and ignored. All that was in it was a wheel of brie and a baguette resting on a bed of pale green straw.

"Why isn't this in the room?" She demanded. She sounded a little too much like Fiona to her liking. "It's not even finished."

"The sourdough hadn't cooled yet," someone said.

"Oh, for…" Elly exhaled and tapped the loaf. Warm to the touch with a firm shell of a golden brown crust with lacy scoremarks. She placed it in the basket, then slid a pricy bottle of wine in against the wheel of fine brie, and baguette. She filled empty space with two short, stubby jars of preserves. She added two fat bundles of grapes, one purple, one green. A bouquet of daffodils, daisies and a sprig of mint brightened the display. When she was finished it reminded her of the bright, overflowing cornucopias illustrated on the pages of the storybooks her father used to read to her.

She hooked the basket on one arm and cradled two crystal wine glasses in her palm, then ran to the master guest suite.

She took the rear staircase, so she wouldn't be seen and hustled through the halls. The room was still empty when she arrived.

The room was so large that from the doorway, the flowers in the wallpaper were mere dots, all the detail gone until one studied closer. The pale blue window dressings were already open and soft light spread over the fine furniture. The bed, already made, was in the centre of the room, allowing for a lot of space to move about or entertain guests while lounging on one of the many couches, seats and tables. She placed the basket on the bed and the glasses on the small dining table. Satisfied with the placement of the welcome gifts, Elly turned to find a breathtaking woman in the doorway.

"Hello,"

“I was just leaving, mademoiselle,” Elly moved to pull her hood down but she wasn’t wearing it.

Shit.

Faye walked deeper into the room, closer to Elly. Her voluminous sky-blue skirt made a wonderful swishing sound every time she moved. “I’m Faye LaFaye. Oh, what a charming gift basket. Thank you. Did you make this?”

Elly ducked her head, facing her good cheek toward Faye. “Enjoy your time at Fiona’s.” She managed to slip past Faye and out of the room, but the woman’s scent chased her. Rich spices and rose. Elly moved double time to return to the safety and seclusion of the kitchen.

It had been a long time since Elly could remember this place sounding so lively. Hosting Faye was very good for business. It seemed she brought every man and some women around for miles. Everyone wanted a glimpse of the famous *Alaeotisian Alure*.

The joyous sounds of frivolity made her feel some undefinable way. Though it had been years since she last cared about taking part in the evening’s events, she now longed to be able to watch the fun and games taking place throughout the manor. She wondered what sort of shows Faye performed on stage for the guests. Instead, Elly was relegated to the kitchen, cutting an endless garden of roses from fruits and pouring rivers of wine and beer.

That night, Elly curled up on her mattress in the root cellar, and tore tiny pieces from the stale hunk of bread she saved from dinner. She gave the

crumbles, one at a time, to a grateful Walter.

“She was beautiful,” Elly whispered as the rat sniffed crumbs from her fingers.

“A perfect smile with straight white teeth. Her hair, it spilled down and over her shoulder in waves, and it was the most amazing blonde. Silver, really.” She tore another bite for the rat. “Her eyes were as clear and pure as a frozen lake.” She looked slyly at Walter. “And just as dangerous. And her *skin*…“ Elly grew silent. Faye’s skin was a cool tan colour, and it seemed to shimmer like sunlight touching grains of wet sand. It was unblemished, her cheeks rosey and bright.

Elly brought a hand to her own cheek and felt the swirling labyrinth of scars that had been scored across her face for over a decade. Tight and stiff and still sometimes warm to the touch. A grotesque web of pale red in an otherwise plain and unremarkable face.

The thought of Faye’s beauty was enough to make Elly cry.

# FIVE

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, AFTER breakfast, Elly was in the back lawn, scrubbing out the undergarments of the twins. It was a day with air full of bluster, and dark, looming clouds.

"Looks like it might rain."

Elly looked to the voice and saw Faye quickly approaching. She was wearing only her white chemise and the wind made the cotton garment mould to the contours of her body. Her hair streamed in the wild breeze.

Swallowing a gasp, Elly lowered the hood on her cape to hide her face.

"So, you do exist." Faye said with a happy voice. "You came and went so fast I was starting to think I imagined you."

Elly swallowed. "How can I help you, Madame LaFaye?"

"Oh, please, call me Faye. And I already washed the blouse myself." With a quick flap, Faye unfurled a damp, pure white cotton blouse. "This is my money maker so I like to be the one to clean it. Make sure it's not damaged." She laughed. "One of the men last night left it rather…sticky."

She reached up and hung the thin white blouse on the clothesline. “Good wind to dry the clothes at least.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Elly said.

A sudden gale blew all around them, lifting swirls of leaves and dandelion seeds. The clothesline rattled and Faye’s blouse took off like a bird taking wing.

“Oh, no,” Faye said, alarmed. “I’ll get it.” Elly abandoned her washing and ran after the blouse.

The cotton blouse danced in the wild wind, travelling too high for Elly to reach, but meandered slow enough to at least be able to keep up with. It twisted in the sky, teasing Elly as it wafted closer to the estate’s property line.

It leapt over the stone retaining wall that surrounded the land. Elly too, scaled over. It wasn’t difficult; the wall was made of stacked river rocks, and was a mere three feet high. She hefted herself up, swung her legs over, dropped down and landed on her feet. She realised now that she was in the thick of the forbidden forest that yearned to grow over the wall and invade her home.

The Forest of Thorns was a massive acreage of land owned by the crown. It grew in a crescent around the rear of the royal manor like a cloak and climbed up the gentle, hooked hill on which the manor perched.

It was home to many species of trees. Pine, oak, birch, yew, ash… all towered until they almost blotted out the sky. Vines crept up the trunks of these trees as if reaching for sunlight. Wherever Elly stepped, moss blanketed the ground like the finest Persian rug. Berry bushes that were taller than Elly offered fat, tempting fruits in bright red and blue and shimmering purplish-black.

But, true to the forest's and the crown's name, there were also many thorns, and Elly had to be exceedingly careful not to get pricked.

Somehow, the blouse continued to travel on the breeze, and all around, the foliage hissed and swayed as the wind raced through the branches. The blouse was a burst of white among the browns and greens of the forest, easy to spot and track, but always out of reach.

Elly grew less cautious as she chased after the garment, and the thorns caught her skirts and pulled vicious tears from them. Her skirts were full enough that it protected her legs from any harm, but it was still annoying, and she'd have a great deal of mending to do later. It seemed to her as though something was racing alongside her. Deep among the wall of tree trunks, Elly swore she spotted a shape of some kind, or the glint of a beastial eye. There had to be any number of animals in these woods, but this one was always a blur or shadow in her periphery and never clear. Was she being hunted?

The tree line thinned out, giving way to a sheer drop-off, six feet above the frothing water, with thick tree roots weaving in and out of the earthen cliffside. It could be climbed rather easily if not for the rushing creek that cut her off. The opposite shore was at least ten feet away and it was on that shore that the blouse settled, hooked on a branch that waved over the river.

Elly looked around to try and find a way across. Below, the currents rolled over the boulders in the river far too strong, and would dash her before carrying her away in an instant. She walked along the cliff and came across a thick tree trunk long ago toppled over. It lay across the creek, bridging one side to the other. She took a deep breath and stepped onto the log.

Elly had to look down, in order to keep her footing. The trunk seemed much wider before she had stepped on it. Now it felt, looked, quite narrow and the rush of the creek below was disorienting. There was room enough to step but she hadn't accounted for knots, branches and splits in the trunk. Old bark crumbled under her slipper and flaked off in chips. The raw wood underneath was wet and slippery. Wetness dotted her skin and Elly wasn't sure if it was spray from the raging water below, or if the black clouds above had finally broken open. Her skirts had grown heavy and were weighing her down. But, she was almost there.

Her toe snagged on a knot and slipped. She balanced on one leg, teetering and swaying back and forth before she regained her footing. She was past the halfway point and the white blouse fluttered like a flag of surrender.

Just a few more steps.

An ominous sound drew her attention. Wolves? Elly couldn't look back, that would bring certain death.

She reached the shore and hopped off the log and onto the safety of the forest floor. She took a moment to settle her nerves before climbing up the tree to get the blouse. She shimmied up the tree and perched between crevices in the branches. She strained and blinked back raindrops, then her fingers brushed the soft cotton. The wind seemed to take mercy on her and the blouse swayed toward her. Elly gripped it firmly and pulled. The thin branch snapped and Elly held the blouse to her chest. She stuffed it in the pocket of her pinafore and hopped out of the tree.

Elly rolled her shoulders as she prepared to once more cross the log. She knew she was just stalling, but the sensible thing to do would be to get it over with before the rain grew heavier.

“You’ve done it before,” she breathed. “You can do it again. One foot in front of the other.”

Elly stepped onto the log and it certainly felt more slippery this time. Of all things, she thought of Walter, how he would scurry across shelves that barely had any room for purchase, or how he would climb up the broom handle or hop across wine bottles as if it were a game.

“Just be as Walter is.” Elly focused her sights on the shore not nine feet away and bolted.

She made it two steps, three, four, five, she could jump to the shore from here. Her foot slipped, Elly careened to the right, seemed to float, weightless and nothing, then crashed into the icy creek. It tossed her about as if she were nothing but a scrap of paper on the wind. She couldn’t breathe, the currents pressed against her chest, smothering her, but she dare not open her mouth. A thought flashed through her mind: would it be so bad should she never surface? She wondered how long it would be until Fiona or her daughters, or anyone at the brothel, realised she was missing. Would they look for her? Would they care? Would they search for her body? Would they bury her? She wanted to be buried, not put on a pyre. Perhaps a watery grave was what she deserved.

Once again, her body reacted while her spirit merely accepted her circumstance. She reached out, and her hand broke the surface and made a mad grasp at anything. She grabbed only empty air at first, before her hand snatched a thick branch covered in a shag of leaves. Some sort of willow tree?

Her other hand joined the first and she pulled her way up, fighting against the current.

Then, all at once the branch she was holding on to seemed to rise and lift her out of the water. It swung, lowered, and Elly was laying on her back on the ground.

She coughed out water and sucked in air. She clung to her cold, wet dress and looked at the shadow of the tree that had saved her.

It wasn't a tree.

It was a form, obscured by branches and thorns as it loomed cautiously just behind the tree line. A bear?

Bears didn't have horns like that.

It's eyes, the same ones she saw earlier, captured her. Deep blue, almost purple. Eyes unlike any animal Elly had ever known.

It's inhuman hand was extended. It wasn't like a paw or a talon, but each strong, leathery finger was tipped with a hooked, cat-like claw. From the fingers dangled a black ribbon, and the wax seal, suspended between two round panes of clear glass framed in silver. Her pendant. It must have torn off while Elly had been lost in the whorls of the creek.

Shaking, Elly reached out and the creature dropped the charm into her cupped hand. She tried to see through the leaves and shadows but could make out nothing but the intense blue eyes and the silhouette of what could only be horns.

She staggered to her feet, her body acting on its own as adrenaline rushed into her veins and she bolted away from the river. She stumbled as she lost a shoe, but didn't stop as she ran into the woods to get back home.

The beast did not follow her.

# SIX

THE BROTHEL WAS EXTREMELY busy for the rest of the day, so Elly didn't have the time to think of the beast until late in the evening, when she was able to bundle up in bed. Curled up under her blanket, laying on her side in the dark, she ran her thumb back and forth along the face of her pendant. It--the beast– had found it and held it out for her. Or maybe she just swallowed too much water and the lack of oxygen was playing tricks on her. The pendant had merely snagged on a tree branch as she struggled through the woods.

But those blue eyes…

The hot breath that warmed her cold cheeks and shoulders.

She recalled the strong hands that pulled her from the river as easily as skimming a leaf from a birdbath. Strong, leathery hands.

She let out a shuddering breath.

Her hand trailed down, fingers walking slowly to gather up her nightgown at her hip. Soon, she curled the hem of it under her palm and reached between her legs. Her fingers buried between her skinny thighs.

She touched herself and found she was enthusiastically wet and wanting. Elly slid her two middle fingers inside and left her palm to cup her clit and pelvis.

She pumped her fingers in and out and rocked her hips against her hand. She rolled onto her back and planted her feet on her mattress. She moved her hips up with each quiet, slow thrust, her ass leaving the bed as her heels pressed deeper into it.

Elly imagined…what? She wasn't sure. Fragments of an idea. Strong wide hips resting between her thighs. Soft, warm, thick black fur tickling her skin. Hot breath rolling over her body. Those claws holding her hands above her head. Those eyes staring into her withered soul and reigniting something within it.

She gasped, her thighs shook and her head fell back as a weak explosion rolled through her body. Her orgasms were never very powerful, always a disappointment. If she were lucky she would get that small burst, usually the pleasure built up only to fizzle and give way to numbness. This was probably the strongest she had ever experienced and it was no stronger than the satisfaction of scratching an itch.

After she came down from her tiny climax, she smoothed her nightgown down, and rolled over. She took the small hardbound book out from under her mattress and began flipping through it.

Even though there was practically no light in the root cellar, Elly could make out the sketches by heart.

Above, something was moving around in the kitchen. It was too late, or too early for anyone to begin the breakfast routine and everything had been washed and put away before bed. Maybe someone was trying to be a little

thief. If anything went missing, like the silverware, doubtless Elly would be blamed.

Did she care?

The sound of plates clinking around, drawers opening and closing.

With a sigh, Elly held the book to her chest and wrapped her crocheted blanket around herself. She opened the door to the root cellar and peered into the kitchen.

Faye was standing at the counter, forking cake into her mouth. She looked up when the door hinge creaked.

“Oh. Hello. I was famished.” Faye’s cheeks pinkened and she forked up another bite of cake. “Grab a fork. Join me.”

Elly hesitated and almost sank back into the root cellar.

“Thank you for rescuing my blouse,” Faye said. ”I’m sorry it got drenched,” Elly said quietly. “You had already washed it.”

“But, it’s in one piece. C’mon. Share a meal with me. It’s my way of saying thank you.”

Thanking Elly by stealing Fiona’s food from under her nose. It was wrong. Reckless. A punishable offense. Elly stepped into the kitchen and sat next to Faye.

“What’s your name?” Faye passed a fork over.

“Elody. But I prefer Elly.”

Faye smiled. “Happy to finally meet you, Elly.”

Elly avoided replying by filling her mouth with cake.

“Good, isn’t it?” Faye said. “Who made it?”

“I did. Well, I didn’t bake it but I made the batter and I built it, made the filling and icing and decorated it.”

Faye’s brows rose. “You have serious skill.”

Elly shook her head. “No, I just do it.” Or else Madame Fiona would kick her out, but she couldn’t tell Faye that. Elly crushed a cake crumb under the tines of her fork. “We all work hard to make *Fiona’s* the best place it could possibly be. I just pull my weight, that’s all.”

“Why don’t I ever see you serving the guests?”

Self-conscious, Elly made sure the scars on her face were hidden by her long black hair. “I work the kitchen.” And halls. And wardrobe. And laundry… She forced a small smile. “Besides, it’s more impressive if you don’t see the girl behind the curtain.”

Faye laughed. “That’s very true. Make it look like a well-oiled machine. I understand.” She nodded down at the book. “What’s that?”

Elly had forgotten she was holding it. “Oh, just my sketchbook.”

“May I see?”

Elly wanted desperately to say no, but years of being punished for disobeying made her place the book on the counter and open it. In the dim light of the kitchen, Elly could see her sketches much more clearly. She forgot how good they were.

“You drew these?” Faye asked as she slowly leafed through the pages.

“I did.”

“They’re really good.”

There were dozens of designs for dresses, but also drawings from reference. Pages of Walter in various natural poses, the town from the view of the attic window or birds in various stages of nest building.

Together, they explored the drawings, Elly providing little stories behind them when asked.

She flipped a page and there was a drawing of the wild woods beyond the wall.

“Was it scary in there all alone?” Faye asked. “Were you afraid of getting lost? Or hurt?”

“No, not really,” Elly answered. “I just focused on getting your blouse back. But, there was this…”

“What?” Faye looked at Elly, eyes sparkling with excitement.

Elly reconsidered her words. “A big tree. That’s all. I thought it was a monster at first. Just the shadows playing tricks on my eyes.” She grinned sheepishly.

Once the cake was fully devoured, Faye placed her hand on Elly’s and said, “Thank you again for saving my blouse.”

“It was nothing,” Elly said.

“And thank you for the fantastic cake and conversation,” Faye added. “I’m starting to really like this trip. Good night, Elly.”

When was the last time anyone had told Elly good night? “Sleep well,” Elly grinned. Faye returned to her room and Elly cleaned the plate and forks, then went back into the root cellar. She crawled back onto her bed and lay down. Talking to someone felt…nice.

# SEVEN

ELLY WOKE TO THE sound of a bell already ringing. Fiona beckoned.

Elly came into the frigid master bedroom and stood at the foot of the bed.

“I have a treat for you, Elody,” Fiona said. “You get to go into the village.”

”I do?” Elly wanted to be excited but held firm on her caution. This could be a trick.

“My daughters and I commissioned William the tailor to make alterations to the gowns we purchased for the ball. He said they would be ready today. Hitch the wagon to the mare and pick up the dresses. Do you think you can manage that?”

Elly forced her face to remain neutral. A task like this would take until evening. It was practically a day off. “Yes, Madame,” Elly said. “I can manage.”

“Oh, and while you’re out,” Fiona extended her hand and dropped a small purse into Elly’s palm. “Purchase a few bars of chocolate for my girls and I.”

“Yes, Madame.”

“Now, be off.” Fiona waved her away.

Elly left the room and went out into the hall, where she could no longer hide her grin.

The town of Perrault-Villeneuve was like any other. That’s what Elly assumed anyway, because she hadn’t really been anywhere else. Once, when she was small, her father took her on a trip to the opera but she was too young to remember it well, and didn’t know at the time to keep it as a treasured memory, for he had died soon after.

The village provided all the trappings and conveniences expected: a butcher, a smith, cobblers, bakers, carpenters and potters. In the town square there was a fountain, around which various shops would set up stalls to do business. Mostly it was farmers selling their milk and eggs, or traveling traders with goods from far off places. That was how Elly would be able to get the chocolate.

In the back of her mind Elly knew Fiona was doing this to embarrass Elly. By forcing her into the world where people could see her scars, all the while increasing Fiona’s reputation among the townsfolk for taking care of an ugly, maimed girl. She smiled a sad smile to herself. The embarrassment was present, but manageable compared to the feeling of being free.

She hitched her mare to a post near the market where some other horses and donkeys were already hitched. Though she was not supposed to, Elly took the time to explore the stalls. Being outside of the brothel walls was so rare, she wanted to enjoy the freedom of not being under Fiona’s shadow.

She accepted the free samples that were offered to her. Tiny toasted pieces of bread with dollops of strawberry jam, egg scramble no bigger than an inch all around, grilled balls of minced meat half the size of a quail egg, small satchels of dried flowers and herbs that served as remedies when steeped in hot water, single wedges of juicy oranges, one grape, and her favourite: black liquorice.

She was in heaven. She wondered if the ball would offer half of such variety.

When she had seen every stall to her satisfaction, she purchased the three bars of chocolate, which were wrapped in waxed paper and tied with a string, then headed with intent to the tailor.

The little bell on the corner of his door chimed as Elly entered. She felt as if she had stepped into a crowd of royalty. The shop was a forest of dress forms, each covered in a gown. The tailor, a man named William, looked up from the vest he was stitching and smiled when he saw her.

“Well, aren’t you a welcomed sight? How long has it been?”

“Good morning, William,” Elly was secure enough to lower the hood on her riding cloak in his presence. William was a friend of her father’s and when she was little, his wife Brigitte taught her simple stitches. Elly wove her way through the crowd of princess mannequins.

“You’re lucky you got me so early. Business has been overwhelming thanks to the ball. All the eligible maidens want a dress. As do their mothers.”

“Which is why I’m here. Are the dresses for Fiona and her daughters ready?”

William straightened with a sigh and a nod. He rubbed his right thigh, kneading the muscle with his hand. “She paid me well to prioritize the

order, which I was happy to do." Limping heavily, he went into the storage room and soon came out with three wicker garment boxes.

"Though I couldn't help but notice the order was for three dresses instead of four."

Elly looked away from a bolt of striped gold silk. "Oh, I'm…" The idea of telling him she wasn't going to the ball felt like a knife in her chest. She couldn't say it. Speaking it aloud made it real, and killed all sense of hope that maybe, *maybe* she would find a way to go.

"I'm making my own dress."

William's eyes lit up. "You are?"

"Yes, out of an old, very luxurious window curtain. I dyed it the most wonderful wine red and it has a beautiful damask pattern in the fabric that comes out when the light catches it the perfect way."

William rubbed his chin and nodded. "Yes, I see. How did you structure the bodice?"

A sneaky smile graced Elly's lips. "I have my ways." She took a breath. "What I *really* want to do is split the skirt down the front, but the rags and scraps I used for the underskirt look so–"

"*Rags*?" William echoed.

Elly bit her tongue. It felt so good to actually be able to talk about her passions and accomplishments and have someone take interest that she forgot herself. She had become so animated with William that it all just came out. That he knew her dress was made of rags mortified her.

He propped her chin up with his fingers and looked at her scarred face.

"I know my wife is watching down on us. Brigitte adored you and would never abide the notion of you going to the ball in rags, no matter how cleverly hidden. And she would never let me live it down if I allowed it."

William limped into the stock room again and when he came out he was holding a bolt of champagne-colored fabric. He placed it on the counter and unrolled a yard for her to see it. “I’ve been saving this for something special.”

Elly took a closer look. The colour seemed almost fragile. Too gold to be cream but too pale to be gold. There was a hint of rose to it or perhaps she was imagining it. There was a faint pattern in the fabric that resembled wood grain. It would be such a beautiful compliment to the bold, almost violent red.

“It’s amazing,” Elly said. “But I can’t–”

“Take it.” William nudged it in her direction. “You deserve it. It deserves you.”

Elly swallowed down a complicated bundle of emotions. “I can’t just take it,” she said. “Please. Let me do something for you in return.”

William looked at her and brought his hands together to nervously fidget. It was an almost silly sight, coming from a man so burly. “I hesitate to ask, and if you say no we will never speak of it again. Like it never happened.”

“What is it?”

“Could you, perhaps, hold me? Just for a short while. You remind me of Brigitte in some ways and it has been so long since I’ve been, well…”

“It would be an honour,” Elly said with a small ladylike curtsy.

“It would?” Again William brightened, and he rushed in his stumbling way to turn the *open* sign hanging on the door to *closed*.

He took Elly’s hand and led her upstairs to his bedroom.

“Would you care for a drink?” William asked. “I could use a drink.”

“That would be nice, thank you.” Elly looked around the sparse room. There was a small wardrobe in the corner, and a full length looking glass. Some dress forms and bust forms that sported nicer men’s garments. There were several charcoal portraits of Brigitte framed on the wall. There were fliers, about their shop opening, advertisements for their services in the time leading up to the ball, and even her obituary. William and Brigitte were pillars of the town.

Memories of the kind Brigitte came to Elly. She had been more a mother to her than Fiona had ever been, the only mother Elly has ever really known. She had been a dressmaker and seamstress, but taught Elly how to knit, sew, crochet and very basic needlepoint. She had gentle arms and deeply calloused fingertips and long dark hair always in a braid or bun, which was probably why Elly so often wore her hair in a bun, too. It was practical.

William handed Elly a short stemmed drinking glass filled with A deep copper liquor. Elly took a sniff of the strong whiskey.

“Do you need it watered?” William asked.

“No.” Elly wasn’t much of a drinker but how strong could it be? She threw back the whiskey and it scorched her, but in a way that she found she liked. It was the only burn she found pleasant.

William poured himself another ounce and drained his glass. He wasn’t an unappealing man, for the greater part of his life he resembled a soldier in the royal army rather than a docile dressmaker. Fit, with long chestnut hair. He always looked at least a decade younger than his age. William had been a woodsman, then a sailor, until he fell for Brigitte, then he joked that he traded in his sea legs for a warm heart. He settled in Perreault-Villanueva

with Brigitte, providing wood and meat for the majority of the town. Until one day, while hunting in the forest, he was injured and could no longer do such hard labour, so he took up the needle alongside his wife.

Brigitte's death had planted grey in his chestnut mane so he shaved it all short. The lines in his face were like the seams in a suit, the construction solid and durable but visible.

The pair went to the bed. Elly turned down the covers, stepped out of her slippers and sat on the mattress. The dry straw rustled under her light weight.

William rounded to his side of the bed and sat. The springs groaned. William and Elly were back to back. Elly turned to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come here," she told him softly. "Lay back."

She guided him to relax on the bed and she went down with him. She put an arm around him in an embrace over his ribs and pressed herself against his body.

She had never laid with a man before. It was nice on some level, but awkward. Elly found it to be too warm, rather stifling. But, it was a small discomfort when compared to that beautiful fabric.

"I remember when Brigette, you and me would have little competitions," Elly said. "To see who could sew the most in a certain amount of time."

"She always won," William said.

Elly smiled, "Yeah. You and I were too clumsy."

"She was a good woman," he said."The best."

They lay together in the silence for a few moments, until Elly began to hum a sweet song that Brigitte used to sing. She stroked William's hair as she sang the familiar, wordless lullabye.

Her voice floated through the dress shop, countless yards of fabric muffling it in the air and preventing it from reaching the windows. But here, in the tailor's lonely bed, her voice was clear and soothing.

Seconds after the song ended, William pulled away.

"I should get back to work. A lot of dresses still need to be finished." William rose with a groan and slowly pushed to stand up.

"Do you want some help?" Elly asked, getting to her feet.

"No, I'm fine. Thank you." He grinned up at her and Elly could see tears in his eyes. She watched him hobble past her, and take the steps slowly, one by one, to the work floor.

Elly followed, half a dozen steps behind. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Always," William was at the counter, cutting a generous amount of the champagne fabric and bundling it up.

Elly took two more steps. "When you were hurt in the forest."

"Oh, that was such a long time ago, Elly."

"I know." She hesitated. "You said it was some sort of beast. Everyone tried to tell you it was a bear, but you insisted-"

"My senses ran away with me," William said, a bit curtly. "I was in shock, seeing things." He tied the fabric tight with a ribbon, tight enough that Elly would have to iron out the wrinkles before working with it.

"You said it had horns," Elly said. "You said it was a dem-"

"It was just a bear, Elly." William's jaw flexed under his skin. He held out the bundle of fabric. "Go along now. Get your dress done." He smiled, but there was a darkness in his eyes. "I can't wait to see it on you."

# EIGHT

ELLY UNHITCHED THE CART from the white mare and put her in the small stables. She gave the horse an apple from a bucket and packed two more into one of the many hidden pockets she had sewn into her underskirts. As she settled the horse, she tried to think of a way to get the fabric into the attic without Fiona or her girls finding out. If they saw it, surely they'd claim it for themselves. And that was if they were being kind.

She could wrap it around her hips under her dress but that would make her skirts fall awkwardly and possibly arouse suspicion. And if it came untied and fell around her feet, well, there was no explanation for that.

She hefted up the wicker boxes into her arms, along with the secret fabric, and walked toward the estate.

The boxes were heavy but Elly walked as slowly as she could as she tried to think of a way out of her problem.

The laundry was hanging on the lines, waving in the breeze, dry and ready to be folded and put away.

A surge of inspiration and relief swelled within Elly as she dropped the secret fabric into the waiting laundry basket. She put down the dress boxes and unpegged some sheets from the line. She folded them quick and messy and placed them in the basket, certain to cover any hint of the pale gold silk.

Elly balanced the basket on top of the dress boxes and entered the estate. She knew Fiona would be waiting with impatience so she headed to their sitting room.

When Elly entered, the girls were each standing at easels and swiping paint on a pair of canvases. Fiona lounged in a chaise, wearing only a thin red robe made of shimmering fabric. Her shoulder slipped free of the sleeve and her nipple was dangerously close to being revealed. Her hair was unbound and flowed along the pillows.

“Finally!” Madeline dropped her paint brush into the jar of water. “We’ve been waiting all day.”

Elly couldn’t help but grin a little at their eagerness. It was positively contagious.

“I’d imagine. Seeing your dresses for the ball must be so exciting.” She put the wicker boxes down on the coffee table.

“Who cares about that?” Madeline said.

“Where’s our chocolate?” Adaline demanded.

In some difficult to define way, Elly was crushed. How could these two say such a thing? The absolute ingrates had no concept of grace or thankfulness or fortune. They had everything they could ever possibly want and they didn’t deserve or appreciate any of it. Not even…

“Chocolate?” Elly’s voice shook. “What chocolate?”

“Stupid, useless girl,” Fiona shot up from her repose on the chaise, her right breast flopping free of the robe. “I told you to pick up bars of

chocolate for the three of us."

Elly picked up the basket of clean sheets. "I must have forgotten."

"Where is the money I gave you then?" Fiona asked, her voice all skepticism and challenge.

Elly froze. "It must have fallen while I was walking…"

"Hit her, mama," Madeline said as she and her sister closed in around Elly. "Make her pay."

"Now, now, girls. What have I always told you? Only stupid people hit."

Elly's skin burned as Fiona took a firm hold of her arm, fingernails digging into skin. She dropped the laundry basket as her step-mother pulled her close.

"Put the sheets away," Fiona hissed in Elly's ear. "Then to the root cellar with you for the rest of the night. No supper." She pushed Elly away, causing her to stumble and fall into the soft folded laundry.

Elly scrambled to her feet and rushed out of the room, holding the handles of the laundry basket in a white-knuckled grip. When she got to the linen closet, she smirked.

She put the sheets away one at a time and tucked her yards of fabric into her own clean blanket. She scurried to the root cellar and stretched out on her mattress.

Elly took an apple from her hidden pocket, and enjoyed the juicy treat. When Walter scurried up to her, she cut a small portion of apple with her teeth and plucked it from her mouth. She held it out and the skinny rat took it in his little paws. He nibbled happily on the fruit.

She saved the other apple for the next time she would be sent to bed without supper. Next, she took out the three bars of chocolate, untied the

string and peeled back the wax paper. She put one bar in her mouth and bit into it. The soft milky chocolate spread along her tongue and she savored it.

Delighted with her cleverness, Elly spent the rest of the evening indulging in all three chocolates until they were no more.

# NINE

ANOTHER DAY OF ENDLESS chores. She saved a bite of chocolate for breakfast with which to start her morning, and it helped a little.

By now the taste of sweet chocolate had faded entirely and Elly was once again performing her usual routine, now onto the task of changing the sheets on the brothel's beds. She decided to start with Faye's room, knowing it must be quite soiled, and that guests of honour require the finest of attention.

Though the door to the guest suite was open a crack, Elly exercised discretion and knocked. When she received no answer, she fumbled her arms full of fresh bedding, and nudged the door open with her toe. She set the sheets down and pulled the messy rumpled comforter from the featherbed.

Water splashed around in the powder room, signaling that must have been where Faye was. Morning cleanse, that made sense. She probably didn't want the lingering drunken stink of strangers on her skin to fester. Elly sympathized; that same stench clung into the sheets and blankets and

pillows of each room of the brothel, wet, or crusted or sticky, and it was her job to wash each set every morning. It must feel so much more personal on the skin, inside her body. Maybe even filthy.

Elly abandoned the half-made bed and crept to the powder room and peeked past the open door.

Being the executive suite, this room had warm running water, a tub, and a pretty porcelain chamberpot with a lid for discretion. The most impressive function of the washroom was the tiled floor and the floor drain that allowed the guest to simply rinse off grime and abandon it to the sewers below without worry.

Faye stood in the tiled partition, slowly emptying jugs of water over her naked body, then scrubbing away the dirt. Her back was to the door and Elly could see her heavenly rear end, with two cheeky dimples popping at the small of her back. She raised her arm over her head and ran a straight razor against her underarm. The scratching sound was almost inaudible. She did the same to her other underarm. Next, she traced her silky legs with the razor in long patient strokes, flicking stubble down the drain with a deft flick of her wrist.

“Could you wash my back?” Faye asked. Shocked, Elly ducked back behind the door.

“It’s alright,” Faye looked over her shoulder, then turned so she was in profile. She was unashamed and made no move to hide her perfect body. “I have a keen sense of when I’m being watched. My back? Please?”

Elly peered past the door again and stepped into the washroom. The thin soles of her work slippers squeaked on the wet tile. Faye handed her a glass bottle filled with liquid. Elly tipped some of the contents into her palm. It was silky, pearlescent and smelled of wildflowers. She had never touched

such a fine lotion before. She rubbed her hands together then massaged Faye's back.

The luxe lotion lathered with tiny rainbowed bubbles as it was worked into Faye's tanned skin. Her body took on an almost golden glow as the lotion was absorbed. Soon, every inch of her back was shimmering with sunlight and prisms, and as slippery as ice.

"Mm, that feels good." Faye rolled her neck, her shoulders, and practically leaned back into Elly. The dampness on Faye's body soaked through the front-face of Elly's pinafore, through the layers of her black work dress, even through the bindings around her breasts. Wet heat met her nipples, awakening them.

The steam stuck to her cheeks and made them wet. Water droplets clung to her lashes. Her soapy hands left Faye's back and slid over her waist, to her belly, then cautiously upward.

Faye put her slender hands over Elly's, and lifted them from her body until her palms hovered over her breasts.

"Would you like to touch them?" Faye asked.

"I shouldn't," Elly said.

"I don't mind."

Faye's breasts filled Elly's hands. Soft and warm, smooth, with not the hint of gooseflesh. Full and bouncy and as soft as a perfectly fluffed feather pillow. Anyone could close their eyes, bury their face in her chest and be lulled into an endless comfort. Faye was so beautiful she was dangerous.

"When was the last time you were touched?" Faye asked in whisper.

That's when Elly realized… she couldn't remember the last time she had been touched by another person in kindness. William was different. That

was in service of something, of giving a friend comfort. This was pure intrigue and intimacy.

“I…I don’t know,” Elly answered.

A sensation grew within Elly. Something warm, unfurling like a rosebud opening to the sun and spring rain. A heat.

As beautiful and intense as it felt, Elly knew it was just simple lust. Though, maybe that was enough. Maybe she could convince herself, make herself fall in love with Faye. It would be so easy to do. Faye, in return, would find it in her heart to take Elly away from here. They could travel the world together. Elly would do anything Faye asked her to do for more sensual, safe moments like this.

Love didn’t even have to enter the equation. She could just be Faye’s maid. Serve her every need or whim. Servitude was what Elly was good at. What else could she possibly be useful for?

“Some believe that one of the most effective remedies is simple skin to skin contact.” Faye entwined her fingers with Elly’s, the firm naked breast squishing against their knuckles. Elly’s scars brushed up against Faye’s elegant breast and as if reignited into flame, Elly snatched her hands away and clasped them behind her back. She stepped from Faye.

“I...” her voice was shaking. “Have to finish making the bed. Enjoy the rest of your wash.” Elly turned and blinked water from her eyes, warm and salty. She shivered in her wet dress as she worked as swift as she could. By the time Faye had finished washing, Elly had long left the room and was already on to the next chore.

# TEN

ELLY WAS DUSTING THE entry hall when the most terrified scream tore through the halls.

“Mother!” It was Adaline. “Mother come quickly! Now!”

Elly hurried up the stairs to the sitting room, where the scream originated. Inside were Adaline, standing on the chaise that yesterday her mother had posed on. She was pointing at the canvas.

“Oh, you’re being ridiculous,” Madeline pushed past Elly and into the room. She went to look at the canvas. “Your painting can’t be *that* ba–“ she cut herself off with a scream and jumped onto the chaise with her sister.

“What is going on in here?” Demanded Madame Fiona. She brushed past Elly and looked at her two hysterical daughters. All they could do was babble and whine and point toward the easel.

Fiona turned to look at the paintings and let out a sharp gasp. “Oh Heavens!”

Gaze screwed to the easel, Fiona backed up until her calves hit a coffee table. “B-burn it!” Her head snapped up and she looked at Elly, still

standing in the doorway. “Elody! Burn it at once.”

“Yes, Madame.” Elly didn’t understand why everyone was so ruffled over a painting. She came in to pick up the canvas when she saw a skinny rat, laying in the pallet smeared with half dried paint.

Walter was stiff and still, with yellow pigment staining his muzzle. His dry grey tongue was drooping out his open mouth.

“Get rid of it!” Fiona shrieked.

Elly pulled the kerchief from her head and untied it. She used it as a shield over her hand and picked up Walter by the tail, then tenderly wrapped him in the shroud of the kerchief. She hurried out of the room and with tears in her eyes ran out of the estate with her friend’s little body in her hands.

Elly buried Walter beyond the gates of the brothel, under a blackberry bramble near the river.

She dug with her hands into the soft earth until she could reach into the ground up to her elbows. Tearfully she tied the kerchief securely around his corpse and placed him in the hole. She covered him with stones to deter scavengers, then filled the grave with earth, and covered it with more stones.

“The thorns will keep you safe,” she whispered. “Goodbye, my friend. I don’t think I would have survived this long without you. Thank you for being there.”

She curled her hands into fists, and allowed herself to feel the pain from hitting her chest. Each time she sobbed, she hit herself.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

From the river not far away, the ducks and herons took wing. Their vocalizations sounded rushed and fearful, and drew Elly's attention away from her grieving and her indulgent self-harm.

She searched between the gaps in the treeline, seeing out a clear sight of the river to catch what maybe had troubled the water birds. Was there a hunter about? If so, she would have to be careful not to get an arrow to the chest.

It wasn't a hunter, at least not one that was human. In the river, with water up to the hips, stood a hulking shape that Elly found familiar.

The beast had returned.

Elly couldn't breathe, she was too filled with undefined emotions. She had just been mourning a moment ago, and now she found herself close to a dangerous creature who could end her life in seconds.

But, he wasn't. He was just… bathing.

He sank down below the surface, so that only his horns were visible, and easily mistaken for driftwood. When he came back up, a thick, silvery fish was in his wolfish jaws, Caged between two sickle-shaped sets of tusks. He swallowed it whole.

Elly couldn't stop herself from creeping closer to the tree line to catch a better look at the creature. The water had slicked through its mane and turned it black as tar. His strong body was covered with fur the colour of gold and clay and cinnamon. Such a beast should not exist in nature. It was devilish, demonic.

Intriguing.

He lifted his head suddenly and took a few deep intakes of the wind. His head snapped in her direction and those blue eyes fell upon the evergreen

Elly had ducked under. The beast let out a huffed cough, a snort, and bounded from the river and barreled into the woods on the opposite shore, where Elly lost sight of it.

Now, Elly was truly alone.

# ELVEN

FAYE HAD REQUESTED A bottle of brandy and two glasses be brought up to her room, which was odd because she had not taken any clients for the night.

But Elly brought the bottle and glasses up and knocked on the door to the suite. Faye opened it, wearing the blouse that took Elly on quite the adventure through the forest and white, ruffled bloomers.

“Excellent.” Faye clapped her hands. “Just what I asked for.”

“Yes, a glass for you and your guest.” Elly tried to peek past Faye and into the room. “And, who is it that you are entertaining this evening?”

“Why, you, of course.”

Before Elly knew it, Faye took hold of her wrist and pulled her into the suite and closed the door. Elly basically froze. She was only permitted in here when it was time to strip it for cleaning.

Faye took the bottle and glasses from Elly and poured two drinks. She handed one glass to Elly, then, glass and bottle both in one hand, opened the double doors onto the balcony.

Elly took a sip of her drink for courage and followed.

By the time Elly came out onto the balcony, Faye was sitting in one of the two wicker peacock chairs. She held up her glass and touched it to Elly's. "To your health, my dear."

Elly sat in the second chair and took another drink.

Faye sat back and looked up at the clear black sky. "Beautiful night. There are supposed to be shooting stars tonight, and I find it rather melancholy to watch them all alone."

"I see."

They watched the twinkling stars, and Elly was gazing so intently that her vision was starting to blur and double. Or perhaps it was just the brandy. An orange-white glow streaked across the sky so quick that she thought perhaps she imagined it until at her side Faye had said "there's one."

"My father used to tell me that if you wish on shooting stars, it may come true," Elly drowned the heart ache drawn by the memory in a mouthful of alcohol.

"That's a belief held all around the world," Faye answered.

Another star streaked across the sky. Then another.

Faye refilled their glasses. "If we lived in a fairytale, and you wished on one of those shooting stars above us, what is it you'd wish for?"

Elly took a drink and held it in her mouth a moment as she thought. She swallowed, then spoke, "To just have something for myself for once. To go to the Ball. To just experience it as a person, not as a maid or hangaround."

Faye turned to look at her. "You're not going to the ball?"

"Oh, no." Elly took a drink. "No, not me."

"Why not?"

"I don't like crowds. I don't dance."

“You don’t have to dance. You can just linger by the little cheese covered crackers and tiny cakes. I’ll even let you borrow one of my dresses.”

The next words out of Elly’s mouth felt dangerous and vulnerable, as if she was inviting daggers to her heart. “Well,” she began in whispers. “I have been making myself a dress.”

Faye arched a brow. Even with a face free of makeup she looked perfect. She smiled and leaned in closer as if the two were conspiring something dastardly. “Can I see it?”

“I’ve never brought anyone up here,” Elly said as she held out her hand to help Faye up the attic ladder. Faye’s hand was as soft as newly bloomed flower petals and warm as springtime. Elly almost shivered. Once they were up, Faye effortlessly navigated the crossbeams and creaking floorboards underfoot. She barely disturbed the dust as she walked. Her entire presence seemed to make this attic smell sweeter. Elly wondered what it would cost for one night with her. It would probably be worth it.

The dawn was casting a silvery light in through the single window and the dress form stood like an armless maiden. Elly pushed back the heavy, dusty curtain to let even more light in. Plastered to the wall were several sketches of dresses.

“It’s made from stained window dressing.” Elly said. “The under skirts are old rags, hose, or bed linens that have worn out. A brothel goes through a great deal of bedding.”

“I suppose it would,” Faye mused. “I’ve never thought about it before.”

The colour was a deep wine red, which the once cream velvet curtains took on beautifully. The old leafy damask pattern that was stamped into the fabric was barely noticeable, but when it was seen, offered an exciting texture in the skirt.

“It reminds me of fire,” Faye said.

“Really?” Elly asked.

Faye grinned at her. “You sound surprised.”

“I hate fire,” Elly admitted. “I’m afraid of it.” She gestured to the scars on her cheek, then realized she just showed someone her scars full on. She turned her back to Faye, cleared her throat hard, and forced a change of subject.

“I managed to get some more fabric for a real underskirt.” Elly hiked the front of the skirt, so it exposed the layers of underskirt and draped in elegant downward waves. “And I’m going to split the front of the skirt.”

The underskirt was a mismatched mess of scraps with clashing patterns, sewn together in uncomfortable geometry. The skill was there, but the sub-par materials could only be pushed so far. “All this will be hidden by the champagne fabric. That’s the dream at least,” Elly dropped the overskirt and smoothed it out. “I’ve still got a lot of work to do. I have to add sleeves to the bodice and some sort of trim to the neckline so it doesn’t look so ragged. Even if I could go to the ball, the dress wouldn’t be ready in time.”

Faye reached over and took Elly’s chin in her fingers. She made the girl face her and looked into her eyes. Heat crept onto Elly’s cheeks. She held her fingers tight like a bouquet to keep from fidgeting.

“This is really what you would wish for, isn’t it,” Faye whispered.

Elly dare not say the words aloud, but she nodded.

“Then why not do it? What’s stopping you?”

Elly tried to glance away. She swallowed the lump in her throat to let out her meek voice. “Look at me.”

Faye smiled kindly. “I am. And I see a young woman who deserves to enjoy her youth as much as anyone else does.”

# TWELVE

THE CLOCKS HAD STRUCK one in the morning forty-five minutes ago, and Elly was still fussing around Fiona's bedroom, dusting and oiling the furniture. It was overcast, making the moonless night especially dark. The oil lamps and hearth fire cast patches of hot golden light but not enough to see specks, smudges and dust bunnies. Elly ran the oiled rag over and over the carved wood, until it was slippery as ice and squeaked with cleanliness.

Fiona stood at her mirror, admiring herself in the ballgown. Fiona's dress was an emerald jewel of a gown with puffed shoulders and bell sleeves that were far larger than necessary. The train was obscenely long.

The twin's dresses were both white and trimmed with gold, practically wedding dresses which made Elly wrinkle her nose. She imagined subtlety would go a long way, and many things could be said about the bridal gowns, but subtle was not one of them. Desperate, maybe.

"Do you think perhaps I should wear a cape with it?" Fiona asked. "I have the one my mother wore on her wedding day."

It would be a garnish addition, but maybe the excess would bring either humiliation or even humility to Fiona. The thought delighted Elly, so she answered with “it is certainly an option to consider.”

After a moment, Fiona said, “You want to attend the ball, don’t you.” It was a statement, an observation, not a question. Elly froze, then rubbed the rag so hard on the table it squealed. “It doesn’t matter what I want,” she answered with obedience. She pressed her legs together, and the pendant rubbed against her inner thigh, a secret comfort.

“If I were to allow you to go,” Fiona said as she preened in the full length mirror, tapping the slightly loose skin under her jaw with the back of her fingers. “What would you do for me in return?”

“Anything,” Elly couldn’t stop herself from saying the word. Tact and discipline were not as strong as her desire. “Anything at all. You have but to ask.”

“And if I asked for you to never speak a word again for as long as I live?”

“I would walk around with a slate board and chalk.” Elly answered, eyes bright and shining.

“And if I said it was to be your last night under my care? That after the ball you are out on the street?”

Elly paused ever so slightly; her mind danced with the thought of the freedom, but the fear of what dark fate might happen to her. She felt herself on a precipice and flinched back, hating herself. She cast down her eyes, her voice quiet as she answered. “Then I would say…” Bile rose in her throat. “That the ball is not worth more than your generous hospitality.”

How she longed to put her fist to her chest. Over and over. To feel the ache reverberate through her ribs in waves and force down the sadness and

hurt.

“That’s right,” Fiona said. “I mean, what would you even wear?”

“Yes, Madame Fiona,” answered Elly.

“How would you make the journey to the manor?”

Again, Elly replied with, “yes, Madame Fiona.”

“But, I am not some heartless beast.”

Elly suppressed a scoff.

“The royal decree states that every eligible maiden is to attend, and it would be disloyal to the crown to disobey.” Madame Fiona lifted her chin and squared her bombastically puffy shoulders. “Therefore, I am willing to strike a bargain with you. Should you find something acceptable to wear, and if you complete all your duties, and that you obey me without question, then you may attend the ball.”

“Really?” Elly exclaimed with a gasp. “You mean it?”

“Are you questioning me?” There was an edged tone in Madame Fiona’s voice.

“No, Madame, not at all.” Elly stared at the train of the dress, hand shaking.

“Good. Who knows, perhaps the prince will even smile at you before he asks one of my beautiful daughters to marry him. I’m sure we can find a fishmonger or stableboy there to marry you off to. Someone who meets my standards, of course.”

Elly knew she was being not-so-subtly insulted, but even the threat of being married off was delightful. Leaving this hellish family, to venture to a new life, no matter how mundane or lowbrow, even that possibility held joy for her.

“Fetch me the bottle of the Thelonious Red,” Madam Fiona told her breezily.

“You want it with your lunch tomorrow?” Elly asked.

“Now.”

Elly looked at the grandfather clock, which was nearing the strike of two. “It’s late.” Her voice shook. Did these words count as questioning Fiona?

“Then take a candle,” Madame Fiona gestured to the candelabra on the mantle. Four candles burned brightly, plugged into the four arms of the gold fixture.

Elly’s mouth went dry and her skin ran hot and slick. She stared at the inch-high flames that were so bright they brought spots to her eyes when she looked away. She imagined the gold candelabra to be burning hot to the touch. She was trembling all over.

Her step mother reached over and plucked one of the candles from the ornament. “Take one, leave the rest,” Madam Fiona held out the candlestick.

Elly blinked back the tears that blurred her vision and she slowly took hold of the naked candle. She was shaking so much that the small flame burning at the wick trembled like a sunkissed autumn leaf. She froze as the hot wax that had collected under the flame spilled over and oozed down the side of the white candle. It slowed, and solidified somewhere past halfway down the length.

“Go on,” Madame Fiona said. “Do as I say.”

Elly moved with mousy steps. She had to turn a full one-hundred and eighty degrees to face the door to the master bedroom that now seemed three times the size. She took a step and was almost sure the doorway slipped back twice as far as she had tread.

“Hurry!” Fiona’s voice was a whipcrack in the room and she clapped her palms together. Elly jolted, the small flame flickered and nearly extinguished. All the while, Fiona still spoke. “It’s late and I’m thirsty. You wouldn’t want me to change my mind.”

“No, Madame.” Elly forged the courage to cup her hand around the flame, to protect it from the ambient breeze. Sweat dripped down her back and brow and she somehow made it out into the hallway.

She turned and ventured down the dark hall, to the grand staircase. She could have taken the servant stairs but she didn’t want to be in such a confined space while holding a lit candle in her shaking hands.

The flame seemed unforgivingly bright no matter how Elly held the candlestick. Her palm was so sweaty. Was the candle wax growing soft in her hand?

She made it to the extravagant staircase and went down each step one by one. The melted wax gathered in a bubble around the burning wick and built itself high. Every step Elly took made both the candle and the clear melted wax jiggle. The convex dome of melted wax grew to such an amount that she didn’t understand how the flame hadn’t been drowned.

Elly paused at the landing between the third and second floor. She was still shaking. Only a few more steps, then the staircase would be behind her and she’d be able to make her way to the kitchen with no real trouble, only unbidden stress and monstrous anxiety.

She opened the door to the kitchen with her hip and crossed the stone floor to her familiar root cellar. She reached for the door, opened it, and turned away from the blast of chilly air it always seemed to hold. The breeze nearly snuffed out the candle and she protected the fragile fluttering

burn with her whole body. When the air settled and the flame once again grew steady, Elly turned to the door.

She couldn't set foot inside. This was her one sanctuary. A place that she could never be hurt. Bringing fire inside, even a small candle, it was a violation of the small securities she had carved for herself.

Tears spilled down her cheeks, but she stepped into the cellar all the same.

The only thing that stood between her and a wondrous night of freedom was one insignificant bottle of wine.

She passed the shelves and baskets and bags of provisions. She walked past her bed and ran her fingers along the tiny steamer trunk of her own belongings. She wove through the waist high garden of barrels and came to where the wines and spirits were stocked.

Stacked against the far wall stood crates and crates of wine. She did not know them by heart because the brothel went through bottles so quickly. She picked up each bottle and read the label by candle light.

Once she finished checking each bottle, she lifted the crate and moved it aside, then repeated the process of searching for the correct bottle.

Maybe they didn't have a bottle. Maybe this was all just a game Fiona had come up with. But, Elly couldn't stop herself from searching.

"One more bottle," she whispered. "Just one more." What if she stopped and the next bottle was it?

In her quest, even the terrifying candle was forgotten.

Then, she found it. Laying in a crate lined with straw, with five other identical bottles. Elly picked out the requested reserve, grabbed the candle she had set aside in an unused canning jar, and brought both back to Fiona.

Fiona was at her vanity, testing out a selection of necklaces, pendants and brooches against her dress. She didn't even look at Elly.

"Oh, you're back." She switched an emerald amulet out for a string of shimmery white pearls, then back. "I suppose you didn't hear me calling. I changed my mind."

For some childish reason, Elly expected to receive gratitude, or at least acknowledgement of her bravery for such a trivial thing as a bottle of wine. She confronted her greatest fear in service of a woman she aimed to please. All her efforts were dismissed as easily as a stray hair on a jacket sleeve. All at once, the anxiety and fear surrendered to exhaustion. "Oh…" was all she could muster.

"It's too late for wine. Especially such a distinguished vintage. Return it to the kitchen. Perhaps I will have it with lunch tomorrow." She put the necklaces down and walked over to Elly, a predatory gaze in her black eyes as she neared.

"Fortunately for you, I do not go back on my word." Then, like a viper striking a rat, Madame Fiona blew out a shot of air from between her lips and killed the flame still dancing on the candle in the jar. A hint of grey dawn cast the room in a faint silvery blue, just enough to see phantoms of objects.

"Go to your room. I expect breakfast to be served promptly at eight in the morning."

With a rustle of fabric, Madam Fiona turned away. "Now, fetch me my bed clothes and get me out of this ridiculously heavy circus tent. I wish to sleep."

# THIRTEEN

ELLY WAS FAR TOO ecstatic to even consider sleeping. She knew that she would have a long day of chores ahead so it would be wise to work on her dress while she had the free time. There would be time to sleep after the ball.

With hands shaking from adrenaline, she stitched together the champagne underskirt and sewed it in place, then worked on the sleeves. The left sleeve was long, drawing down the entire length of her arm and ended in a point on the back of her hand. The other side was sleeveless, though she fashioned a fingerless glove that went past her shoulder out of the same fabric given by William. She used buttons that she had collected over the years, popped off dress shirts and strings of pearls and dresses that patrons of *Fiona's* had ripped into. She selected identical sizes and shapes, then covered them in the champagne fabric and sewn them into place. As she worked, time faded away and before Elly realised it, the dress was complete.

She sat back and admired her work. All that was left now was to try it on.

Elly stripped out of her pinafore and black dress, then lifted her chemise over her head and off. She unwound her bindings and let her breasts fall heavy and free. They were marked with pink and red bands of irritation but those would fade eventually. She ran her fingers over the pink grooves to massage in some relief, and her nipple immediately hardened. It felt so good to take a deep breath. She was now only in her stockings, slippers and her hidden pendant made of wax and ribbon.

She lifted the dress off the form and pooled it carefully on the floor. She stepped in and pulled it up her willow body. She fed her arm through the sleeve and pulled on the glove, and used her hands to get the bodice to cradle her breasts perfectly.

It felt exquisite, a second skin. She pulled a sheet off a covered full length looking glass to admire herself. Tears pooled in her eyes. She had never felt like this before. The girl in the mirror wasn't Elly. She was confident, lovely, maybe even beautiful. A lady.

She was going to the ball. Her life's desire was coming true.

Behind her reflection stood a bust form clothed in her father's old suit jacket. The gold buttons were still so polished and the blood red fabric was unbothered by moths. Elly picked up her skirts and walked to the jacket.

"Mademoiselle Elody Nicolette DeVerre." She curtsied. "It is the highest honour to meet you, prince." She straightened. "Have this dance? With me? But there are so many lovely maidens here that… Well, if you insist. It is unbecoming to refuse a request from a prince."

She took the coat from the mannequin and held the cuff of one sleeve in her hand, and hugged her arm around the back. The coat had enough structure to not completely collapse in her arms.

Elly swayed and stepped and spun around the attic, pretending to follow her invisible prince. Even if it wasn't to be like this, even if, as Faye had said, she stayed by the croquembouche and duck l'orange, she was still attending, and that simple fact meant anything was possible. Including being asked to dance.

When the song in her mind ended, she draped the coat over her shoulders as a gentleman might do on a chilly night walk. She wandered slowly from one end of the attic to the other.

"I'm having a wonderful time tonight." Elly ran her fingers against the sheet covering a long sofa as she walked along it. She took hold of the sheet and pulled it away as she walked, uncovering the silk and oak clawfoot sofa as she walked.

"Sitting and talking in the garden sounds wonderful, thank you." She swept the coat off her shoulders and held it before her again as she sat on the couch. She hugged it to her chest. It was tailored to fit a big, broad shouldered man and covered her entire torso and more.

"Why, your highness…" Elly bit her lip and lay down on her back. She reached past the lapels and into the jacket. She touched the warm black satin within. She snaked her right arm inside the left sleeve of the jacket and her fingers, acting on behalf of her imaginary prince, slowly explored the landscape of her gown, until they met the warmth of her thigh.

The oversized cuff of the jacket sleeve between her thighs lent authenticity to her fantasy, and Elly's legs willingly parted for her prince's hand to explore.

'His' hand moved slowly, learning the gentle curves and dips of her body. The way the oversized cuff of the sleeve grazed against her skin was something she never before experienced and it offered a new dimension to

the intimate exploration. Elly was already breathing heavy, her nipples pressing against the confines of her bodice. It was difficult to breathe, but she loved it.

She closed her eyes and focused on the sensations sending her body alight. She loved the chill of the buttons on the sleeve as they rubbed against her pubic mound, or the crevice between her hip and crotch.

The fingers teased, taunting her body with lessons she had never learned. She had always been so blunt, rapid and impatient with herself, but this time, it was different.

Her left hand ran down the centre seam of the coat and grasped it tightly so that it wrinkled in her fist. “Please,” she begged, squirming on the sofa, her ballgown skirt a cloud of worthless rags and expensive fabric surrounding her. “Why do you tease me so, my liege?”

Elly was in such a state that small, gentle pearls of her arousal seeped from within and ran ticklishly down between her bottom cheeks. She could not recall ever being so impassioned. Her opening, warm and dewy, pulsed in time with the beat of her heart, and was chased by the marching of her blood in her ears.

Her clitoris was touched and it sent a jolt of electricity through her body. She gasped and leaned her head forward. She gripped the shoulder of her coat in her teeth and groaned. Her hips rocked, the skirt riding up her body, her rear sinking into the plush silky sofa cushions.

“Please, your majesty,” she breathed. “I want to feel you, if you’ll have me.”

Another gasp as ‘his’ fingers pushed inside her, two of them, her body so unquestionably willing and open to pleasure. In and out, the fingers sank,

up to the third knuckle while the palm and on occasion the jacket cuff, or a shiny, cold button kissed her clitoris.

Elly bit the jacket again, and buried her face in it. Her hips thrust to meet the pleasure, the attic filled with the sounds of her soft whimpers, the slip of wet skin meeting wet skin, and the groan of the sofa's ornately carved wood fixtures.

She threw her head back, teeth still clutching the jacket. Her back arched off the sofa and her thighs clamped shut around her hand as the spark of pleasure within ignited and buried its way through her body. It resonated in shockwaves and it was almost impossible to breathe until the ecstasy released its hold on her throat and she panted like a hunting hound after a kill.

And still, while it was the most powerful pleasure she had ever brought herself, to say she was satisfied would be untrue. It was good, the first time probably she could ever say she was content. Yet, deep inside, Elly still felt hollow.

# FOURTEEN

THE KITCHEN STAFF WERE surprised to see Elly enter through the door instead of coming up from the root cellar as she did nearly every morning.

“And where were you this morning?” Greta asked.

“I wanted an early start.” Elly washed her hands thoroughly in the basin, then grabbed the cast iron skillet and put it on the wood stove that was already hot. She grabbed the fresh eggs someone had collected from the hen house and cracked one on the edge of the skillet and let the yolk drop onto the hot surface.

Everyone in the kitchen watched Elly fearlessly use the cook stove. She cracked several more eggs into the skillet and watched them as they hissed and quivered and became white and yellow and sunny.

She didn’t know if it was the fact she was allowed to attend the ball, or the fact she handled fire, but Elly knew that cooking an egg was nothing to fret over.

She put the eggs on a plate and set them aside. She cut a loaf of fresh, cool bread and put the slices in the oven for a moment to toast.

“Greta, could you please handle the sausage?” Elly asked as she moved on to cutting the fruit. Though she had unlocked a new level of confidence, the spitting, angry grease of frying sausages and bacon were still intimidating. Greta was too stunned to do anything but comply with the request.

Elly put the fruit on hold to retrieve the toast from the oven. A blast of heat hit her face, along with the smell of warm bread. She took a deep breath, indulged in the scent, then collected the toast and put it aside.

She thought it could stand to be a bit hotter, especially for the breakfast meats. Elly went to the alcove where the logs were kept and collected a few in her arms. She unlatched the door to the firebox and opened it a little less than half way. She could do this, but she still wanted a shield between herself and the wild flames. With a self-satisfied smile, Elly fed the quartered logs into the fire, then shut and locked the fire box. She stood and faced the cooks and kitchen staff. “What else can I do?”

“Um, prepare the coffee?” Greta suggested, and Elly got right to it. She handled the pot of boiling water without fear, but perhaps a bit too much caution. Someone could have done this faster but Elly was determined. Soon, there was a full pot of piping hot black coffee just waiting to be enjoyed.

While Elly finished with the fruit, and prepared the plates, she asked, “Is the dumbwaiter sticking today?” The thing had been finicky for days now, sometimes working, sometimes not.

“No,” someone answered. “It’s behaving so far.”

“Wonderful,” Elly put the dishes on the tray, covered them with the silver cloches, and took them to the sliding door in the wall. She placed the meals

in the dumbwaiter and pulled the rope, sending the lift up the three levels of the maison.

“You’re quite sunny this morning,” Greta mused. “This isn’t like you.”

Elly couldn’t think of a response that wouldn’t give away the reason for her mood, so she just shrugged and hurried to fetch the breakfast waiting on the third floor.

Madame Fiona and her daughters were in the solarium for breakfast this morning. Elly brough the tray in and served each of them in kind.

“There’s something different about you,” Madaline narrowed her eyes at Elly as she lifted the cloche off her plate.

Adeline looked skeptical at the food. “Perhaps she’s poisoned us.”

Fiona daintily bit a slice of sausage from her fork. “I said she can attend the ball.”

Madaline dropped her fork into her eggs and the perfect golden yolk split and ran over the plate while Adaline collapsed in a fit of coughing as she choked on the juice she had been sipping.

“What?” Madeline asked. “Mother, *what*?”

“*Her*?“ Adeline rasped. “At the ball? With *us*?”

“You well know the invitation stated that every maiden attend,” Fiona said as she cut another small coin of sausage. “We have an understanding. Provided she completed all her tasks.”

Elly wanted to point out that she didn’t want to be seen with them any more than they did with her, but she knew she’d have to massage the wording. “I’m just going for the tiny sandwiches. You won’t even know I’m there.”

The twins scoffed but went back to their breakfasts.

“Is there anything else I can get you?” Elly asked.

“No,” Fiona said. “Go on now.”

Elly returned to the kitchen and still in good spirits, gathered a bowl and flour, butter, milk and sugar. Humming a little tune, she baked two dozen sugar cookies. The simple idea of cookies delighted Elly since they were such a happy treat and it had been so long since she had one. Not since she was little.

Once the cookies were done, she put them on plates and waved her apron at them to cool. She was very eager to share them and could barely wait for them to become a suitable temperature. Risking a superficial burn, she picked one up. It was crisp at the edges and still soft in the middle. She cupped it in her palm and bit into it. A burst of steam rose from it, and she balanced the hot bite on her tongue, but it tasted wonderful! She ate the entire hot cookie, a little too quickly to truly savour it, but enjoying it all the same.

“Cookies, everybody.” Elly entered the lounge where the professional companions, men and women, waited in repose for the brothel to open. It was a large, lovely room lined with mirrors and good lighting, with wall sconces. They each had a vanity, there were sofas and chairs and many places to relax. Books, and a harpsichord and a gramophone with wax cylinders that played music.

The companions and performers chatted and laughed and passed the plate until their share of the cookies were gone and the plate was empty. Elly received a chorus of thank you’s, and that warmed her heart.

Her next stop was Faye’s room. The door was open a crack, but Elly knocked anyway.

“Come in,” Faye was behind the changing screen and peeked over. “Just the girl I wanted to see.”

”I brought cookies.” Elly held out the plate that held four of the twenty-four cookies. “I made them myself. They’re still warm.”

Faye smiled and stepped out from behind the screen. She was once more in her, apparently, favourite blouse, and a wrap skirt. “So, whispers are starting to get around.”

“Whispers?”

“They’re saying you’re going to the ball tonight.” Faye smiled as she took the plate from Elly and set it on the table. “I knew it would happen. Come with me. I have a couple things to show you.”

Elly followed Faye to the ornately carved armoire next to the equally opulent bed. Faye picked up a pair of backless black heeled shoes. They were made of stark black suede leather and for wealthy folk rather unremarkable but to Elly they were very impressive.

“I ordered these because they can go with almost any outfit, but they’re too small for my gawky feet. Take them.” Faye practically thrusted them into Elly’s arms. “But this is what I really wanted to show you.” From the top shelf, Faye brought down a latched wooden box. She swung the latch and held the box open for Elly to look inside.

It was lined in pillowy red satin, and held a masquerade mask made of what looked to be glass. Primarily it was a shade of red, but when the light shifted, then came out oranges, pinks, and even a bit of purple.

“I thought it would be lovely with your dress.” Faye said.

“I…” Elly couldn’t form words, they were all trapped and tangled in a lump lodged in her throat.

Faye closed the box and held it for Elly. “Take it. I won’t accept no for an answer. This mask, your dress, they need one another. A complete set.”

With trembling hands, Elly took the box. “You’re a godsend. Thank you.”

“Oh, it’s not free.” Faye stared at her. “There’s something you have to do in return.”

Of course. Charity didn’t exist in Elly’s world. Why would she ever just be given anything? “What is it?”

Faye smiled and took Elly’s face in her hands. Her soft palm was warm against the rough scar on Elly’s cheek.

“Promise me you’ll have the best night of your entire life.”

With a careful smile Elly nodded. “I swear.” Before she could rethink it, she quickly kissed Faye on the cheek.

“Save a dance for me, ghostgirl.” Faye let her go and Elly hurried to the attic.

She opened the box and carefully took the mask. She held it to her face, a snug but perfect fit, like it was moulded to her features. It didn’t even irritate her scars.

She admired the look in the mirror and barely recognized herself with her scars hidden.

She tied the ribbon together and draped the mask over the neck of the dressform, then left the attic, a light bounce in her step the entire way.

# FIFTEEN

ELLY FOUND FIONA AND her daughters in the boudoir, preparing for the ball. Hanging on her arm was a basket of sewing supplies, to fix any last minute details, and in her hands was a silver tray with a pot of coffee, hot water, tea bags, cream, sugar and cups, along with the last plate of cookies.

"What's this?" Fiona asked.

Elly smiled. "I thought we could all share a treat while preparing for the ball."

The suggestion was received by twin smiles, patronising and sticky-sweet. Madeline picked up a cookie, then Adaline, and they each bit and chewed.

"I hope you like them," Elly picked up the invitations to the ball and read them. The script was so crisp and elegant, the eggshell paper gilded with gold edges.

The twins exchanged a look.

Their noses wrinkled.

They gagged.

“Disgusting!” Adaline threw her cookie back on the platter. “Repulsive.”

“You brought sugar for our tea,” Madeline tossed down a teaspoon. “But no honey.”

Fiona spoke up calmly. “While you were wasting time playing house, we are trying to get ready. You were supposed to be here.”

“God, Elody, can’t you do a single thing right?” Madeline exclaimed.

“Can’t you?” Demanded Adaline.

Elly stared at the three ladies.

“If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have breakfast in the morning. Or clean clothes.” Her voice was small, barely above a whisper. Her hands crushed into fists around the invitations. “Without me, you wouldn’t have tidy rooms that people pay money for. Money you all use for your pretty dresses. I know you don’t want me here. None of you do.” Her voice was growing now. “I’m only here because you need me, not want me. I know you two don’t realize that.” She looked past the twins and stared directly at Fiona. “But, you do.” She walked between the girls and neared her step-mother. “You know what would happen if I were not here. And it scares you, and you hate that you could never do this on your own. If not for me, this place would fall apart.”

For an instant, Elly saw it in Fiona’s eyes. The fear and confusion brought on by the servant girl standing up for herself. She savoured it.

The look changed, though, into something hard. Elly’s words had reached her, but didn’t stick.

With a bravery and foolishness that Elly didn’t realize she had within, she threw the invitations into the lively fire dancing in the hearth and warming the room.

“Mother,” the girls shrieked. “Our invitations, she’s burning our invitations!” The twins wailed, holding each other in a desperate embrace. Elly watched the fancy paper and silvery embellishments turn black, curl and then be devoured into nothing.

Elly looked back at Fiona who was giving her a pitying smile.

“Poor girl. You apparently forgot that every eligible lady is invited by default. Even if that wasn’t the case, our name is enough to get us through that door. Who are you, Elody? Very poetic of an act though.” Fiona brushed past Elly, her monstrosity of a dress hissing along the carpet. She picked up one of Elly’s cookies. “If not for you, Elody, your mother and father would still be alive.”

The room turned to ice. Everyone realised that Fiona had crossed a line that had never even been toed. Elly saw a flash in Fiona’s dark eyes. This was something no one could turn back from or make right.

Elly refused to cry. “I think about that, every day, Fiona.” She whispered, and walked out of the room as her step-mother took a bite of the cookie.

Elly threw open the attic window and stepped onto the sill.

The bell rang, and the twins were screaming for her.

“Elody! Do my hair!”

“Elody! Fasten up my bustle!”

“Elody! Where the hell is my ruff?!”

How quickly they forget.

Elly made no move to answer.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

As the sun was starting to set, the carriage pulled up and, half ready, the three piled into it. Adaline was without her bustle and Madeline without her ruff. Her hair was done up, but it was imperfect. Only Fiona looked immaculate.

As if she would settle for anything less.

Elly watched the carriage roll away from the brothel and head down the gravel road toward the manor. It ventured on until it was no longer in Elly's line of sight. She was so heartbroken she couldn't even cry.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

The sun was sinking lower now and the sky was as red and gold as her gown. The carriages of the men who had no business being at the ball were rolling up now, to enjoy an evening of debauchery under the cover of dusk, while the rest of the town looked in awe and envy at the royal manor. With their daughters as debutantes or maidens still eligible to marry, the fathers and brothers didn't need to be discreet because no one was watching them. It was like a black wave of water entering the brothel as they all wore their riding coats and travel capes and their towering chapeaus.

She stared down at the stone patio four stories below. If done right, a fall could shatter her body. She would be free of their torment while they would suffer, and claw their way around until they were laughed into pennilessness. The idea was sweet. Once she was gone, they would know true misery and humiliation.

It might even be comical, her body smashing into bits in front of some men who just wanted a good time. Maybe a horse would spook and it would run off and cause a catastrophic carriage crash.

But if she ended it all now, then her life would have been nothing more than that of servitude. She would be forgotten, her existence meaningless.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

A glint caught Elly's eye. The glass mask captured a beam of dying sunlight and seemed to beckon. Hum. Tease.

Elly ran her fingers down the bodice of the dress, along the tummy, and through the folds and draping of the skirt.

"I am going to the ball. And I am never coming back here again."

Elly tore off her black dress, not caring a spit that it once belonged to her mother. It had come to represent all the abuse and degradation Elly had suffered while wearing it.

She untied her chest bindings and unwound them as fast as she was able. Her breasts bounced free and she took a deep breath and a long stretch.

"Dreadful things." She discarded the wraps on the floor. Naked except for her stockings and slippers and the pendant around her thigh, She lifted the dress from the bust form and delicately pooled it on the floor. She stepped in, and pulled it up her body.

It moulded to her shape, the bodice cinching in and making her waist look tiny. The bustier cradled her breasts but gave enough lift as to be alluring. Perhaps she could even draw a gentleman's eye.

She pulled on the single fingerless glove and smoothed it out. It was a second skin, a serpent with new shiny scales.

Her hair… would be a problem. She didn't have the assistance to plait it into some elaborate style, so she did her best with what she could. She took a few top layers and twisted it into a bun, then braided two lengths and coiled them around the bun. The rest she let freefall down her back.

She slipped on the black suede shoes Faye had given her, and tucked the mask into one of the hidden pockets she had sewn in the underskirts. She of course couldn't resist this small security of having pockets. She also stuffed

her meager savings in the pocket as well. If she wasn't returning, she may have to buy room and board, or fare for a ride.

Once more she admired herself in the full length mirror. She didn't recognize the woman who stood before her. Elegant, and proud and unblemished. She bit her lip.

Well, if she was going to make it, she had better get going. It would take hours to get to the royal manor by foot.

Elly didn't want the staff or the patrons to spy her, nor did she want gawkers from the town watching her as she trekked toward the manor. So, she opened one of the many trunks in the attic, and pulled out her father's travel cloak, and one of his top hats. She fanned the cloak onto her shoulders. It felt heavy and warm. Comforting. It smelled musty, not like him and she found that a little disheartening. Still, the weight of it was pleasant.She twisted her hair up and tucked it under the hat, then walked like any man through the brothel, and out the door.

# SIXTEEN

"IF I KEEP A steady pace and do not stop for rests, I should make it by, oh, nine? Ten?" She murmured. "That would give me a little bit of time to enjoy the ball, then, after that …" Elly hesitated. Where would she go after that? She was resolved not to return to Fiona's. That left very few options.

As Elly deliberated, a familiar carriage passed through the gates of the brothel's property. She tilted her head as the carriage came to a stop.

"Somin' amiss, monsure?" It was Tomas. He gave a knowing smirk. "Enjoy yourself at *Fiona's*? The girls sure are a delight, eh?"

"Tomas, it's me, Elly." She raised her hat a little.

"E-Elly? What are you doing?" His cheeks burned red, like he was embarrassed to have said such things.

"I'm going to the ball."

"On foot?"

Elly gave a quick nod and hurried to change the subject. "What are you doing here?"

“Faye wanted a specific bottle of wine. *Emmanuelle*, I think she said. Since your place has the most impressive collection, I was sent to fetch it.”

“Oh, *Elle Mouille.*“ Elly said. “It’s in the very back of the root cellar.”

“Thanks.” He paused. “Fiona told me that if i saw you I’m not supposed to talk to you but… Are you really planning to walk all the way to the palace?”

“I don’t really have other options. But I’ve made up my mind. I’m going. Even if it’s just for a moment.” Though it was a daunting task, and now that Elly had taken a breath, her enthusiasm was deflating. Yet her determination remained.

Tomas looked toward the brothel. “Don’t ever mention this to anyone, but you helped me out so I guess I can return the favour.”

Elly perked. “Really?”

“Let me get the wine and meet me down the road. I can take you as far as the manor gates.”

“You will?” Elly wanted to jump into the carriage and hug him.

“Meet outside the wall. I’ll ride by and pick you up.”

“Promise?” It wasn’t that Elly didn’t trust him, survival had just taught her to be leery of vows people made to her.

“The way I see it, I owe you a favour. Wait for me. I’ll be as quick as I can.” He flicked the reins and his horse started trotting. The wheels on his carriage squeaked, and Elly hurried out of the gates.

As she waited, she looked up at the royal manor that loomed over the town of Perrault-Villeneuve. Night had fallen and the stars were twinkling above. In the manor, each torch and lantern was lit and Elly could see shadows and silhouettes dancing along the walls. But it was too far away to actually be able to see such things and she knew she was probably just

imagining it. Still, this was the most alive she could ever recall seeing the palace all year. It was normally a rather gloomy structure. If even noticed at all.

How long had she been waiting? How long did it take to grab wine out of the cellar? What if it *was* a trick? What if Fiona knew Elly was going to try to go to the ball anyway and devised a plan of sabotage? What if Fiona promised Tomas time with all the girls in the brothel?

He was probably laughing about it right now.

Elly sighed. "I will wait five more minutes."

She counted, slowly, to six four times, and on the fifth time she got to forty-seven when she heard the creaking wheels of Tomas' carriage. She peered through the gate to be certain and there he was, coming down the road.

Once he was through the gates he eased the carriage to a stop and Elly climbed in. She sat in the back, still ensconced in her man's riding cloak and hat.

"So. You were forbidden from speaking with me? What did Fiona threaten you with?"

"Putting me on stage and make me walk barefoot across a bunch of broken bottles." He grimaced. "I'm pretty sure she's all talk, but…"

"Don't worry. I won't tell." In truth, Elly was planning to never again speak to Fiona or her daughters. So, they won't get the truth from her.

"You, um…you look really nice," Tomas said. He couldn't even see her dress under the cloak.

"Thank you," Elly said softly, and ducked her head down to hide her face under the brim of her hat.

"So, um. Have you been to the ball before?"

Elly couldn’t help it. She laughed. “No. Fiona would *never* approve of that.”

“Hence the disguise?”

“Hence the disguise.”

The ride to the manor seemed to take both forever and no time at all. Elly was quite nervous, but also excited. Their carriage merged with the procession of other carriages waiting to drop off their well to do ladies. They were about thirty feet from the gate when Tomas said, “this is where we part ways.”

Elly fit the mask onto her face. “Thank you, Tomas, I won’t ever forget this.” She stepped from the carriage and walked through the gates. The dark of her cloak and hat kept her from being noticed.

# SEVENTEEN

ELLY WALKED UP THE stone steps to the palace and could hear the musicians inside, and the polite chatter. So many feminine voices.

She came out of nightfall and into warm golden light. Every candle and wall sconce and lantern was lit. Above, massive chandeliers made of deer and moose antlers hung, supporting tall candles that blazed.

The floors were polished white marble veined with grey and flecks of gold and silver. It was so luscious that she felt guilty for daring to set foot on it. She stepped onto the long floor length carpeting and it felt so plush the toe of her shoe seemed to sink a little. She was walking on a cloud.

Though this was a daring adventure, she knew her place and her promises and sought out the table with the croquembouche and the eclaires.

“Prince Ashton!” Fiona’s sharp voice cut into Elly’s brain like a knife. “May I present my daughters. Adaline and Madeline.”

Elly froze. Just behind her stood Fiona, her girls and…the prince? She dare not look in case she be caught.

“I’m Madeline.”

“I’m Adaline.”

The twins tittered and judging by the extensive rustling of fabric, curtsied.

“I’m the oldest,” said Madeline.

“I’m the youngest,” said Adaline. “Would you care to dance, your highness?”

“First born gets the first dance,” Madeline said, her voice too sticky sweet to be genuine.

“...Edvard?”

It was Elly’s father’s name, being spoken by Fiona.

Elly had to get out of there, before she was seen. Melt into the crowd maybe. She took a step forward.

“Excuse me,” Fiona said.

Elly took another step.

“Excuse me,” a butler walked up to Elly. “May I take your cloak and hat?”

Elly’s heart thumped and she took a breath. “You may.”

She took her hat from her head and let her black hair tumble down. She untied the cloak and held it out for the servant.

“Thank you very much,” she said.

“My pleasure, Mademoiselle,” the butler took the items, and with a bow of his head, went to hang up the articles of clothing.

“Oh…” Fiona had seen it all.

With a glance over her shoulder, being sure to show her good side to the woman, Elly addressed Fiona. “Were you speaking to me?”

“Oh, uh. No,” Fiona stammered. “It was nothing.”

A smile curved Elly's lips. "Have a good evening then." She lightly lifted her skirts and walked into the crowd.

Fiona hadn't recognized her! She never dreamed that would ever be possible. Her heart was pounding and she stopped by an ice sculpture of a wolf to catch her breath.

The room grew dim, and Elly feared she was passing out. Then one single light beamed onto the stage, and Faye, covered in strings of pearls and living butterflies, descended on the stage from above.

Surely she must have been tied by ropes, with some burly men slowly leading her down, but Elly could see no sign of that, not a single stitch of string.

Her toes touched the stage, and she began to dance, her perfect body completely obscure yet fully exposed. As she moved, the butterflies flew, one by one, out open windows, slowly revealing more and more of Faye's naked body. Once they were all gone, she swayed as she plucked or cut or bit the strands of pearls from her body. They scattered on stage in a rattling chorus. She was naked.

She sang a song about love, and being loved. Her voice was oh, so enchanting. Her's was a siren's song, full of sweetness and danger and yearning. Elly tried to commit the song to memory but the lyrics never stayed in her mind too long.

From somewhere came a serpent. As long as Faye's body, it coiled around her slender limbs and trim waist as she writhed and undulated. It slid between her breasts, curled around one of them just enough so that it was slightly lifted up, and looked even fuller. It crept between her legs, the scales running like tiny rows of seeds against her pink nethers and coming away shimmering under the spotlights.

For the finale, the snake was taken from the stage and Faye came back wearing only a large, semi-sheer pleated cape. She danced with it, holding hidden structures sewn into the cape to make it look like she had wings. At times, she was a flower, spinning in a breeze, or a bird, gliding amongst the clouds. An icy moon, a quiet sea, magical and stunning. A Goddess.

How any woman in this manor could even pretend to compare to Faye, Elly had no idea.

“Well, she is quite the performer isn’t she?”

The performance had ended, and someone to Elly’s left was speaking, pulling her out of the misty afterglow of awe.

A gentleman whose hair was the colour of cinnamon yet had a light glint of gold. His eyes were a deep blue and his skin was pale and a little weathered, though that did not distract from his handsomeness. He was tall, at least six foot three and wore a medallion with the Thorn family crest. Prince Ashton Thorn. Elly faced forward, afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing.

“Yes. Faye was quite happy to perform tonight.”

“Oh, you know her?”

Elly couldn’t help but smile to herself. The idea of Faye becoming the queen of the land, well, if anyone deserved it, she did. “Oh, yes. We’re friends. We take drinks together under the stars when she’s free. And exchange clothes.”

“Is that so?” he mused. ”She would make quite a bride to some lucky man, but I don’t see anyone able to keep her wanderlust in check.” Elly knew full well that she was baiting the prince, and was astonished she was so brave to do so. She hadn’t even had any wine, and so couldn’t blame her boldness on that. On the other hand, playing the role of cheeky matchmaker

was better than acting a quivering mass of nerves and tears like many of the young women here. It was harmless fun, and when had Elly ever been allowed to have fun?

"*There* you are," Faye cut through the crowd, wearing her white blouse and many petticoats. "You owe me a dance."

"Of course," The prince stepped forward. "it's the least I can do to thank you for a wonderful sh–"

"Not you, your highness. Respectfully. Perhaps later." Faye took Elly's hand and pulled her to the dance floor. Elly glanced back toward the prince. His expression was one of amused intrigue. Faye and Elly danced, palm to palm, and stepping back and forth or prancing around one another. Faye's palm was warm. The music was romantic but lively, with strings and flutes that coaxed the partygoers into a jolly mood.

"Your hands are shaking," Faye smiled. "Relax. Breathe. It's a magical evening. Believe me."

"It is," Elly agreed. "Just being here is a dream. It never would have happened without you."

Faye giggled sweetly with a shrug of her beautiful bare shoulder. "I just gave you a mask and some old shoes. You found the courage and the cleverness to make your way here."

The familiar sense of being watched crawled over Elly's skin and she realised the dancefloor had cleared until it was just she and Faye. Everyone was watching them. Her eyes met the prince.

"He's looking at you," Elly whispered.

"He's looking at you, Elly," Faye whispered back. "They all are."

Elly glanced back toward the prince, into his blue eyes and there was something in the way he was watching the dance. Something predatory, but

not dangerous. Perhaps more a guardian than a hunter.

Faye's voice drew Elly's mind back to the dance floor. "Tonight is not going to last forever. It is a once in a lifetime moment. Please, do not let this evening end with any regrets."

As the song ended, Faye bowed to Elly as a male suitor would, and Elly curtsied in return. Then, Faye whooped with a clap of her hands and the pipers and drummers began a new song and the guests twirled back onto the dancefloor.

Elly wove through the dancers and looked at the prince from under the veil of her eyelashes. They met together again at the icy wolf sculpture. When she saw the prince, he was staring intently at the pocket watch chained to the lapel of his jacket. He glanced up, spied her, and snapped the pocket watch closed.

"You dance remarkably well," he said.

"Thank you, your highness."

"Ashton Thorn." He took her gloved hand in his and brought her knuckles to his lips in a smooth, chivalrous kiss. All the while his gaze was locked on her's. "And your name?"

Elly stared at him as heat rushed up from her stomach to her heart. "Ash… Elly…Thorn," she stammered.

"Ah, a fellow Thorn?" He smiled. "Coincidence. I wonder how far we've scattered our seeds." Elly put a hand to her chest but a shy laugh still escaped. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that. I'm nervous. Forgive me." She took a breath. "Please, allow me to try that again?"

"By all means, Madame."

Elly smiled, took her skirts and curtsied as if she were a proper lady, and not just pretending. "Mademoiselle Elody Nicolette DeVerre."

“A lovely name. Would you like to accompany me for a drink, Elody?”

“Elly, please. And I would be honoured.”

Ashton offered his arm to her and for a second Elly didn’t know what to do. She moved as if she were a marionette on strings, trusting some unseen hand to control her body while her mind reeled.

Colours and fabrics moved around them in a blur of motion, or was the crowd parting like a spoon through well mixed egg whites.

Prince Ashton escorted Elly to a horseshoe bar made out of polished oak that had the most beautiful grain patterns. Golden fixtures decorated it and a large mirror served as the back wall, with a wide assortment of liquor bottles and spirits. The selection was more varied than Elly had ever seen at one time.

“Fairy fire,” Prince Ashton ordered. “Two, please. And do put on a show for us.”

“At once,” the bartender bowed in respect then took out two ornate stemmed drinking glasses. Then he selected a bottle from the display. The green liquid within danced as the bartender tossed the bottle in the air and caught it on the back of his hand. Another toss and the glass bottle flipped end over end. He caught it in his left hand, tossed it behind his back and caught it in his right hand.

Elly could not help herself and she clapped.

The bartender placed the bottle on the counter and produced two spoons. Each was shaped as a spade, with decorative embellishments and slots carved out of the silver. He bridged each glass with the spoons, then rested upon them a single cube of pure white sugar.

He opened the bottle and the cork issued a delicious *squeak-thunk*. As the greenish liquid was poured, Elly could catch a whiff of something almost

medicinal. Each glass was filled until the drink reached the top of the rounded bubble moulded into the drinkware.

“Certainly a great deal goes into this drink,” Elly remarked with a smile. This was incredibly fun.

“Some say it causes madness, or at least hallucinations.” Prince Ashton leaned in to better speak into Elly’s ear. “This is the best part.”

The drinksmith struck a flint and lit the sugar cubes aflame. At the sudden sight of fire, Elly gasped and backed into the prince. He put a large hand on her shoulder, his thumb working up and down the back of her slender neck. His cotton gloves could not hide the strength and warmth of his fingers.

The sugar cubes melted and bubbled under the blue and orange flames. The blue was identical to the colour of the prince’s eyes.

“Now,” Prince Ashton eased her closer to the bar, and the burning drinks, and he slid them under a footed glass barrel filled with iced water. Four spouts reached out like limbs and Ashton positioned each drink under a spigot.

“Turn it until there’s a steady drip,” he said as he turned on his spout. An eager line of water beads dripped onto the sugar and doused the small flame.

Elly did as she was shown and her spout released a thin but enthusiastic stream of clear, cold water. She found it exhilarating to be able to reach over the flame, maneuver the spout, and have control over how quickly the fire died.

The green of the drink turned a murky white as the sugar blended with the spirits. They stirred the drinks with their fancy spoons.

Elly couldn't contain her smile. It seemed like the clinking of the spoons against the glass drinkware soared higher than the musicians leading the guests in dance. "This is quite the production."

The prince touched his glass to hers and a pure, flawless chime rang out. "To a grand evening, spent with beautiful company."

Her? Beautiful? She almost laughed at the absurd notion. Or, maybe he was talking about himself? It was probably just politics. A prince couldn't be heard calling his guests ugly, after all.

Elly sipped the drink and her eyes lit up. "Liquorice. I love liquorice."

Prince Ashton smiled. "That's good, then."

"And the drinkware is lovely. So ornate." Elly lifted it so the designs in the glass caught the light. "Where is it from?"

"I made it." Prince Ashton said.

"You?"

"And the fountain. Glasswork is a hobby of mine. It keeps my hands nimble. What sort of things do you do to pass the time?"

Elly took another sip of the absinthe. She couldn't very well tell him her pass-times included mopping, dusting, and laundry. Although…

"Tailoring." She ran a hand along her skirt. "For instance, I made this dress."

"Very impressive." The prince smiled, and his expression made it seem that he was being genuine. Or he was a world class liar.

"And I suppose I like the outdoors." Rather she hated being under Fiona's roof. But there was an undeniable freedom when she was running through the forest, regardless if it was away from some sort of beast, or after a naughty blouse.

"Would you like to join me in the gardens, then?" he asked.

Her? Venture into the royal gardens with the prince? The notion seemed absurd and yet, she couldn't bring herself to say no.

"I would want nothing more." Elly took his arm, and together they walked out of the ball room. As they left, Elly caught a glimpse of Faye, who gave an encouraging smile. She also saw Fiona and her girls, who were looking around like blind mice, trying to find the prince again.

# EIGHTEEN

THE NIGHT AIR WAS more chilly than either of them expected. The stars were now disappearing behind grey clouds.

“Oh, I hope it doesn’t rain,” Elly said as she gazed up at the sky. How romantic would it have been to point out the constellations with the prince? Or, maybe it was a silly thought. When had she become such a silly girl?

She looked over at Ashton and his gaze was fixed on the pocket watch ticking away in his palm.

“Am I boring you?” She meant it as a gentle taunt.

“Quite the contrary,” he pressed the pocket watch closed. “I fear this night ending.”

“So do I,” Elly admitted. She hoped the prince couldn’t sense the hint of forlorn angst in her voice. She had nowhere to go after this. Maybe in the morning she would fill her pockets with stones and jump off the bridge into the ever raging Silverflow River.

“I’ve never seen you at the ball before,” he said, pulling Elly from her dark thoughts.

She looked up at him and the light from the torches cast on his face made the contours and angles striking. She hoped the mask and the evening darkness did enough to hide her blushing cheeks. “It’s my first time. I’ve… been ineligible until now.”

“Well, I am very glad you’ve finally had a chance to come.” Prince Ashton said.

“Me too.” Goosebumps erupted on her flesh and a shiver danced down her spine. She held herself.

Seeing this, the prince unbuttoned the golden buttons on his impeccably cut double breasted long coat and draped it around her shoulders like a regal cape. She didn’t understand why this simple act made her heart leap and her skin tingle.

The jacket was slightly heavy, the epaulettes ensuring the shape of the shoulders so she looked smaller in it than she was. It held his scent and his heat and the lining was of the most luxurious black silk.

“Is that better?” he asked softly.

Why was she noticing his warmth? She didn’t like warmth. She liked the cold. She deserved to be cold. Elly tried to nod but was unsure she pulled it off. “Thank you.”

The gardens were stunning, a testament to curated beauty, wrangled nature. Flowers that Elly had only seen on books lined the shrub wall of the hedge maze, or bowed along the pathway, serving as a living tunnel. And the air was full with the sweetest, gentlest, most innocent smell. Yet it was still second place to the scent of Ashton’s cologne around her shoulders.

They walked across a short bridge that stretched in an arc across a narrow part of a lake large enough to take a small two person rowboat. Even during an overcast night the water was glassy and reflective.

They sat on a stone bench overlooking the lake, with the mansion before them. Fireflies danced among the cattails and the crickets and frogs chirped music.

“Look,” Prince Ashton pointed to the clouds, there was a sound like when a freshly fluffed pillow hits a feather mattress. There was a spark of something shooting into the sky and then suddenly it exploded in a burst of noise and colour. Elly jumped and buried herself into his arm. He chuckled.

“It’s alright. I won’t let anything happen to you.” He nudged her chin up and directed her eyes toward the fireworks. “You don’t want to miss this.”

She had watched the fireworks from the attic every year, but being so close, she hadn’t considered they’d be so loud.

But they were amazing.

The grey clouds took on the colours of the explosions, turning red and blue and gold. They all burst in different patterns. Spheres, sunflowers, pinwheels, falling twinkling lights.

Elly was awestruck.

The fireworks display crescendoed into a cacophony of colour and light and noise for the finale, then it was over, leaving only an opaque cloud of smoke the wind was already pulling apart.

Elly said nothing when the prince tilted her chin with his finger and leaned in. Her heart was scorching. He kissed her and she kissed back.

If she were to end it all tomorrow, she probably wouldn’t want to die… untouched.

She kissed him again and she could feel him take in her scent. She grabbed the front of his vest and turned her body toward him, opened herself up to him, to let him know she was willing.

He trailed his mouth down the front of her throat, and, with a growl that seemed both playful and needy, nipped at her narrow collarbone.

He kissed the tops of her breasts, anything lewd or obscene still safe and snug in the bodice of the gown. Her chest heaved as she felt the press of his lips, the graze of his nose, on places nobody had ever touched before.

Prince Ashton left her breasts slightly shiney from his kisses. He lowered himself onto one knee.

Elly held her breath, what was he doing?

He removed her black shoe and kissed her toes, then rounded to her slender ankle. Her ankle! So intimate and sensual. She let him explore her small foot, her calf. He ventured further under her skirts.

For a moment, panic shocked her body. He would see the rags of her dress! The idea was humiliating.

Until it wasn't.

Elly didn't understand why but she was taken by a sort of calm, a trustfulness and a sense of safety. The prince never did comment on her creative handiwork as he travelled up her legs.

She gasped as he buried his face between her thighs. His shoulders curled as he took a deep breath in. He licked her with the flat of his tongue, dragging it wet and slick along her most intimate place. It pulsed against the attention and her thighs quivered just a little.

Ashton did it again, then pushed his tongue inside her, which elicited another gasp, this one much sharper, and melting into a moan which he answered with something like a growl.

Elly parted her legs more and gathered her skirts out of the way so she could see him. The prince, on his knees before her, met Elly's eyes. Wordlessly they seemed to communicate something.

*I want you. I will protect you.*

Elly nodded her head in encouragement. She wanted this as well. She wanted him to keep going; she didn't want to stop.

He pulled his tongue out and flicked the little seed above her entrance, then plunged his tongue back into her.

Feeling someone else tease her clitoris was otherworldly. One little touch and she was already losing her mind.

She reached down and ran her hand through his rust coloured hair, then took a fistful of it. She navigated him, pulling him so his mouth was in front of her clit. She moved her hips in small circles, grinding her little seed into his tongue.

Ashton closed his mouth on it and began to suckle. Elly grit her teeth to keep from screaming in pleasure. Her pussy pulsed with the beat of her heart and after one exceptionally enthusiastic suck, she felt a little slip of wetness dampen her inner skirts and splash against his chin.

He shifted his focus, tongue speared into her again and another small rivulet of juices slid out. It landed on his tongue. His nostrils flared and he pulled out of her. They kissed, his tongue sliding into her mouth. Elly could taste the anise of the absinthe, rich little canapes he had enjoyed through the evening, but most of all, she tasted herself. She blushed hard.

Ashton pulled his glove from his right hand and his naked palm cupped her. Elly nodded.

He pushed two middle fingers in and Elly clapped her hand over her mouth to muffle her cry. It didn't hurt exactly; she had explored those places herself, but it was more than she was accustomed to. She held him around the shoulders and buried her face into his neck. His silky russet and gold hair caressed her cheek.

“Is this alright?” he asked, perhaps concerned by her reaction.

She nodded against his shoulder. “Yes,” she said raggedly. “Don’t stop.”

His fingers curled, twisted and parted within her as he thrust them over and over. She held onto him as if letting go would mean her death. Something within her was igniting, brighter and hotter and far stronger than the flame that ruined the small sugar cubes. More powerful than the fireworks even. She could barely catch her breath in anticipation of all-consuming ecstasy.

As Elly balanced on the precipice of indescribable pleasure, an ominous sound boomed from the manor. The strike of the hour.

Elly’s nails raked along his fancy clothes as Prince Ashton pulled away. He stood from the bench and shook his head. There was regret and fear in his eyes. He stepped back once, then again. “I…”

Another gong of the bell rang out. He looked sharply at the bell tower atop the manor.

He turned away from her and ran.

Elly sat there in confusion, her body which was tingling with passion a moment ago was now shuddering with the sharp sting of rejection. She gripped the prince’s coat and pulled it tighter around herself. She would have asked what had happened but it was clear: Being with her was either a mistake, or a farce.

Elly rose from the bench. Only now did she realise it was raining.

She walked, watching the toes of her black shoes peek out, then disappear back under her skirts that were now wrinkled. The rainstorm was going to ruin the suede. She continued walking for some time while, behind her, she could still hear the frivolities coming from the manor. Was the

prince telling them all about his time with her? The silly girl who thought that just once someone would want her?

She looked up and to find that she was lost. Behind her was a hedge maze. In front of her was a T-junction. Left, or right? Elly couldn't decide.

"Maybe I could just spend the rest of my days here," Elly muttered. "I could be the disgraced ghost of the Thorn Estate hedge maze."

She was standing in a puddle, stark red against the soft grey of the stone path. Blood?!

No. The rain was washing the beet dye from her dress; she hadn't had the free moments needed to condition the dress with vinegar to fully seal in the dye. The crimson was dipping away, fading the deep burgundy colour and exposing the smoke stained off-white curtains that the dress truly was. It was time to stop pretending.

Elly let the sob wrack at her. Hard, and hidden by the rain. Something louder than the cajoling in the manor, louder than the bell, louder than even the fireworks filled the air.

All devouring.

*BOOM*.

And then a horrendous flash of light that turned the entire overcast sky to silvery-blue for a second. Elly screamed in terror but the thunder drowned her out. She ran, blindly turning corners and racing down seemingly indistinguishable halls of hedges edged with rose bushes. Another flash of lightning, another yawning boom of thunder. Elly was blinded by tears and rain as she tried to outrun her fear. The storm brought with it bad memories, and hysteria.

The barn where she had been playing by herself. The rainstorm. The lightning that had struck…

She rounded another corner and the maze suddenly opened up to a garden. Stone paths and perfectly manicured grass. Hedges up to the knee and bird baths. Chess tables, and benches. On a sunny day it would be beautiful and calming.

In the centre was a large gazebo. Within the gazebo was a monstrous shape. For a moment, Elly thought it was a large boulder. But it was breathing. And it's eyes were looking right at her. Her burning lungs seized at the sight of it, then sucked in air at another flash of lightning. The fear of the storm, of the memories they brought, of the smell of the burning hay and her father's bubbling flesh as he used his body to protect her from the flames. The agony of the fire leaving its kiss on her arm and her cheek.

*Flash!*

Elly hurried to the gazebo and huddled against the hulking beast. She hid under its arm, much like she had when she was a small girl and her father held her until he died. The rain beat against the roof of the gazebo and fell in torrents off the domed roof. The wind screamed, the thunder roared and the lightning flash so bright as to blind her. But under the arm of this beast, Elly was warm.

She chanced a look up at the beast. In a flash of lightning she could see him clearly for just a moment. It was the same as the one in the woods. A wolf's face framed by a lion's mane, crowned with two sets of horns; the first, curved like a ram, the second, spiraled like a gazelle. Two sets of tusks jutting from a lower jaw crescent as the moon. Her heart was pounding.

And yet…

"I haven't felt this safe since the last time I was in my father's arms."

# NINETEEN

ELLY LAY ON HER back. Beneath her was the most comfortable featherbed she had ever touched, let alone slept in. *Fiona's* had luxury but this bed was all together on another level of quality.

She was still wearing her dress, the red now almost completely drained away, the pink shocking against the bloody splashes of crimson dye that remained. Under her, the crisp white sheets were damp and marred with more reddish-pink.

Elly gasped at the ruin she left behind. "What have I done?" She lifted her hands to her face and realized that she still wore her mask.

How had she gotten here? Last she remembered was a thunderstorm, a gazebo, and…

And warmth.

Safety.

She turned her head and in the corner stood a figure dressed in black. Elly jolted in surprise.

"Who are you?" She demanded. "Where am I? How did I get here?"

When there was no answer she said, “say something!”

Frustrated by the silence, Elly pressed her palms into the eyeholes of the mask and rubbed the sleep and bleariness from her eyes. She looked once more at the figure and saw it for what it was. Nothing more than a coat rack, hanging from it was the black riding cloak and tall hat that she had worn to the ball. She sighed at her silliness and flopped back onto the pillow.

She wondered what time it was. Fiona must be fuming as to not have breakfast yet. The thought made Elly smirk.

She regrettably abandoned the heaven of the bed and walked to the window. Morning light arched through the glass. She unlocked the latch and threw open the panes to see out and get a better idea of where she was. A crow landed on the sill.

Elly looked down at the village from atop a cliff.

A gasp caught in her throat. “Thorn manor.”

There was a knock on the thick wooden door, and Elly spun on her heel and pressed her back to the wall. The door slowly opened with a creak and a groan and the friendly face of an older lady with a maid’s cap poked in.

“Good morning, sleep well?”

“Why am I here? Who are you?”

“Formally I am Madame Dupont. Maid and cook for the Thorn family.” She pushed the door open wider with a practiced foot. A beautiful silver tray was in her hands. It was moulded with the shape of leaves and vines. It had little clawed feet for eating in bed. There was a matching silver cloche over the plate but Elly could smell the potatoes and sausage. Her mouth watered.

“You can call me Jillian.” The maid put the tray on a table that could easily seat two. “We hope you like sausage.” She lifted the silver dome and a puff of scented steam rose into the air. The smells of the food grew stronger as they were no longer bound by silver.

“We?” Elly asked.

“Well, the master, mostly.” Jillian set the plates onto the table. “But I worked hard on this meal and appreciate when my efforts are acknowledged.”

Elly took a step toward the table. “I know the feeling.”

“You’ll find some clothes in the wardrobe. There isn’t much but no lady wants to stay in wet, messy clothes.”

“Why am I here?” Elly asked again.

“The master feared you would catch your death in the storm so he brought you here.” Jillian pointed at a door by the wardrobe. “Powder room is through that door. You will find a running shower, a toilet, and a tub. Use it at your leisure.” She clapped her hands together. “Anything else I can do for you, Mademoiselle?”

“Where’s the prince?”

“He is indisposed at the moment but I will tell him you asked about him. Will that be all?”

“I’m sorry about the bed. I’ll wash the sheets myself, as soon as I eat, I promise.”

Jillian waved a hand. “Nonsense. You’re a guest.”

“But, I–”

Jillian cut her off. “Will that be all?” Her tone suggested that there was only one correct answer.

Elly ran a hand through her black hair. It was tangled and wild. “Yes. Thank you.”

“Very good. Enjoy your breakfast.” With that, Jillian left, closing the door behind her.

To start, Elly went at the meal like a savage animal. She was on her third sausage when she realized that Fiona was not here to admonish her for taking more than her share, more than was necessary. She slowed down and allowed herself to taste the meal, to savour it. She couldn’t remember when she last ate so well. She saved her crusts of bread and gave them to the surley crows that congregated at her window.

After she had cleaned her plate of every morsel, she gathered her dishes and took them to the washroom. She turned on the sink and rinsed her plates and cutlery under the warm water. She dried them on a hand towel, gathered them up on the tray neatly and placed it outside her door and into the hall for Jillian to pick up. Duty done, she returned to the washroom. Heated plumbing was still a rather new thing, and an amazing luxury. Not even the brothel had it.

It was simple enough, Elly turned the tab on the faucet like the absinthe fountain and put a large cork in the drain. She stripped and her body settled into the tub.

Elly couldn’t recall when she last allowed herself to just soak. The hot, steamy water eased her tight muscles, her aching bones and her weary soul. The cleansing lotion left her skin smooth and her hair soft. She could have fallen asleep in the bath.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. The stranglehold Elly had on her emotions melted slowly under the heat and aromas of the bath. She was taken by a profound sense of relief. Just for today, she didn't have to be at Fiona's beck and call. She didn't have to anticipate the needs or wants, the wishes or demands. She didn't have to humbly, dutifully accept the humiliation thrown by her stepsisters.

Elly was free.

At first she curled into herself and hugged her knees to her chest, but then she decided, no, she refused to make herself small right now. She unfurled her limbs and stretched out in the tub. She leaned her head on the rolled up towel under her neck and let her tears flow unabated. Heaving sobs wracked her body and the bathwater sloshed about.

The catharsis was unparalleled to anything Elly had ever experienced In her life.

Eventually, Elly realized the water was cooled and her fingers were pruning. She unplugged the cork and sent the water draining and stepped out of the tub. She wrapped a towel around herself, combed out her wet hair, and went to the wardrobe.

Jillian had said the dresses weren't much but to Elly, they were far greater than she felt she deserved. She selected the blue dress with roses embroidered on the front button bodice. The colour of it reminded her of the flames of the absinthe; of his eyes.

Elly stood at the looking glass, gathered her long hair in her hands and bundled it up atop her head. A new style would be fun and exciting, if not for her scars.

There was a knock and she let her hair tumble down her back and shoulders. She turned away from the door, stepped out of the gaze of the

looking glass, and said, “yes?”

“Elly DeVerre, was it not?”

The voice made her skin warm. It was Ashton’s voice but there was a different quality to it. It seemed fuller. Perhaps it was the echo of this building.

Elly folded her arms over her chest to hide the scars on her hand. “Prince. I wanted to thank you for your hospitality. You were a true gentleman.”

“The pleasure is all mine, I assure you,” he said.

Elly chewed on her lip and thoughts raced through her mind. She wanted the gentle, primal touch like last night. She wanted him to grab her and pull up her skirt and just… Or perhaps throw her on the downy featherbed and claim her fully like a wild wolf.

There was too much light in the room. They would have to wait until after nightfall.

How long had the silence between them stretched on? Elly searched for something to say.

“The…view… from this mansion is breathtaking.”

“You can stay as long as you like,” he said.

“Am I to remain in this room?”

“You may have free reign of the manor. We are on the third floor. On the second floor of the main building, you will find the library.”

“I think I’d rather like to venture in the garden.” She blushed. After a pause she found the courage to say, “Perhaps you would like to join me and we could resume our activities from last ni–”

“That can’t happen again,” he said sharply, the hint of a snarl in his voice.

Elly paused. “Of course.”

Of course. Several drinks in and the misty haze of night time and torchlight, things can be believed to be pretty. Desirable. But in the light of day, who would ever want her? Especially a handsome prince such as Ashton Thorn.

“But,” his voice was quiet, laced with the tone one gets when they knew they behaved harshly and were attempting to make amends. “I would like to join you for tea in the gardens. If we may.”

“I would like that.” Would she? Well, it was better than walking circles in this room. “It’s such a pretty day.”

“That smell of fresh rainfall on leaves,” he said. “I will have Jillian bring you to the gardens for afternoon tea.”

“I look forward to it.”

“I hope you wear that dress. It looks beautiful on you.” The prince said. “I really like the colour.”

The door groaned closed, then clicked shut.

# TWENTY

WHEN IT WAS A quarter to three, Jillian escorted Elly out into the gardens. It was different in the daytime. So many more pastels and greens, and the stonework was so much more vibrant but it was no less beautiful.

Elly wore the blue dress as requested, and a wide brimmed sun hat with a veil to hide her horrid face.

The air was crisp and the sun bright. There was a pleasant floral scent riding the gentle wind. Butterflies and bees fluttered from flower to flower.

“Paradise,” Elly said.

“What was that?” Jillian asked.

“Nothing,” Elly blushed under her veil. She never usually spoke aloud like this. She was getting careless. Maybe Fiona’s constant vigil was actually a good thing. She looked down at her feet as she walked behind the maid.

“And here we are,” Jillian said brightly.

It was a beautiful iron laticed table with a matching chair. A three tiered tower of sweet confections and small sandwiches, and a tea set for two.

Jillian pulled the chair out and Elly sat. The maid poured tea, and asked how Elly liked it.

Elly stopped breathing. She had always set the tea tray for Fiona, her daughters and any guests that requested it, but never had the chance to experience tea time for herself.

A heavy knot tied itself up in Elly's chest. "I don't know."

"I find I enjoy mine with a splash of cream and a single lump of sugar." Prince Ashton's voice was at her side, or, would be, if not for the towering shrub wall that stood between them.

"Afternoon prince Ashton." Elly's cheeks burned anew. "Forgive me, I hadn't realised that you had arrived. I would have greeted you properly."

"I like the lack of proper behaviour." As if to underscore the point, Elly heard him stir his tea with his spoon noisily clinking against his cup. He slurped his sip and, though she knew she should look down on the uncouthness, she giggled.

"Ever since last night, I've wanted to hear you laugh again," Ashton said.

Elly's cheeks burned. Jillian winked at her and smiled then offered to cream and sugar the tea and Elly nodded.

"You're not sitting with me?" Elly asked.

"I'm right here," he said. "I'm right beside you." Again, there was a deeper timber in his voice also a smooth easiness, a trustworthiness. A good voice for a person that, theoretically, one was required to follow into battle and lay down their life, should Ashton ask.

This must be what they call the eccentricities of the wealthy.

Elly relented. "I suppose that's true." She sipped her tea. The cream and sugar really brightened up the bitter leaves.

"So, other than tailoring and the outdoors, what else do you enjoy, Elly?"

“You remembered my interests?”

“Of course.” Another quick, subtle but intentional slurp.

“Do you remember the hobbies of all the women who attend your dances?”

“Only those who I find engaging. Which is extremely rare.”

Elly thought she might as well trust in good nature. He hadn’t upset her so far, or mocked her. The worst he could do is laugh at her, and she was used to that.

“I like animals a great deal. Even those most would consider pests.”

“I saw you feeding the crow this morning at your window.” Prince Ashton said.

“I had a big rat friend I had named Walter. He was a sweet and gentle creature. Sadly he passed away.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. A pet can bring much joy.”

“I buried him.” Elly said, dulling her pain by placing an entire sugar cube on her tongue. It crumbled into sweet sediment in her mouth.

“In the woods,” Ashton said.

Elly sucked sugar off her tongue before she spoke. “How did you know that?”

“It’s what I would have done for a friend.”

“Oh.” Elly wasn’t sure that made sense but did not question it. Instead, she changed the topic. “I spend time drawing and sketching on occasion,” she answered. “And I enjoy stargazing. Hunting out the constellations, watching stars fall like raindrops, following the moon on its journey from one end of the sky to the other.”

“Ahh, a scholarly woman, then?”

“No. I’m not smart enough for all that. I just find it comforting.”

“The library has a few books on astronomy and astrology,” Ashton said.

“What’s that?” Elly picked a macaron from the tiered tray.

“The study of the stars and other celestial bodies.”

She put the macaron back on the tray. It felt rude to eat and speak at the same time.

“That sounds delightful. I didn’t know there was a study to it. I think I might like to see those books.” Though, Elly could not recall the last time she read something new. Her father used to read her bedtime stories. Stories about ferocious dragons who kidnapped maidens and a handsome prince would slay the beast and rescue the princess. She was too old for such stories now.

“The collection is small, but unique.” The Prince said. “Full of exotic books from all around Alaeotis. Most are quite rare. Some are even…” Elly sensed that he was closer, somehow. Her cheeks warmed as he said, “… Forbidden.”

Elly let out a shuddering breath. She peered the best she was able through the thick hedge and tried to get a view of the prince. She saw his hand, large and strong, encased in a glove. His hand was big enough to cradle the entire teacup in his palm like a delicate baby bird. She did not recall such big hands when they danced. She imagined those large hands on her hips now. On her thighs, reaching under her skirts and–

He slurped, and her fantasies were broken by her amusement. To keep from giggling, she selected a ripe peach from the bowl. She took a bite of it, her teeth sinking into the slightly fuzzy flesh, into the juicy meat of it. It was perfect, just the right amount of tart and sweet.

“This peach is astonishing,” Elly stared with wide eyes at the fruit. The orange and pink around the pit glistened.

“Have you tried it with honey?” Prince Ashton asked.

Elly took the small honey dipper that was in the honey pot and drizzled the slow golden liquid over the fruit. She took another bite and it was, quite possibly, the best thing she had ever tasted.

“Oh, god,” she moaned, slowly chewing the bite then swallowing.

“I am glad you’re enjoying it.”

“Is yours as ripe as mine?” Elly asked.

“I don’t have any. I just prefer tea.”

“What?” Was he wasting his precious food on her? “How can that be?”

“Your enjoyment of it makes me glad.”

Elly frowned. “All the same, knowing I’m indulging and you’re going without takes a lot of pleasure out of the experience. I thought we were having lunch together, not me gorging myself.” She took a breath to calm herself. “Here. We will share it.” Once more, she drizzled honey on the peach, then carefully tossed the treat over the hedge. She heard it land in his leather-gloved palm. She also heard the juicy sound of him biting into it.

She licked her fingers of the honey and juices that had slipped down her hand.

“You’re right. It is quite sumptuous.”

“Savour it.” Elly took her previously teased macaron from the tray and took a bite. It was airy and crispy and tasted like almonds.

“I’m sorry there is no liquorice.” Ashton apologized. “I hadn’t the time to get any.”

“That’s alright.” Elly hesitated. He probably hadn’t intended, but now that he mentioned something about last night, the door was open to that haunted subject.

“What happened last night?” Elly asked carefully. “Why did you leave? What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing,” Ashton immediately answered. “It’s not you, Elly. I bask in your company.”

“Then what is it?”

“I am unwell. My birthday is the one time a year I am allowed to enjoy myself, free of the weight of my condition.”

“Is that why we’re not sitting together? It’s contagious?”

His chair scraped loudly against the stones on the ground. “It’s time for me to tend to royal duties. Will you do me the pleasure of joining me for afternoon tea again tomorrow? Same time and place?”

It had been a thoroughly pleasant afternoon up until the moment she started asking unwelcomed questions, and she did very much enjoy being in his presence, walled off or not. “Happily, Prince Ashton.”

The prince let out a heavy breath. Had he been holding it? “It does my heart well to hear that, Elly. I look forward to it. Please, continue to enjoy your tea. The library is on the second floor. Jillian or Jaques can show you the way.”

“There’s a beast.” The words came out calmer than Elly expected them to. She took a sip of tea. “Prowling the hedge maze.”

There was a long pause, until Ashton broke it with a question. “Do you fear it?”

“A monster and a beast are not the same thing. I’ve met true monsters before. I don’t think this beast has any intention to harm me.”

# TWENTY ONE

THE MANSION WAS NOT what Elly had imagined. It wasn't bustling with socialites, the societal elite and servants. The halls were spacious and empty and dark. The curtains were drawn to shield them from the outside world. It was cold and lifeless. It suited Elly all the same.

As she walked the halls, she could not shake the feeling that she was being watched. Not stalked or pursued or hunted, but definitely observed. She tugged the veil down to ensure it didn't flutter up and expose her scars.

She found the staircase and ascended to the second floor and from there, found her way to the library. It was a large room. Lined wall to wall with bookshelves.

The centrepiece of the room was a rounded wall with a massive fireplace which for now, held no fire. She saw no candelabras but strung along the walls were wires with clear glass bulbs hanging down. Elly tapped one and it offered a pleasing *tink* sound.

"Did he make all these little globes himself?" She followed the strand until it led her to a switch embedded in the wall. She turned it and the string

of bulbs burned to yellow-white life.

“Magic!” Elly smiled. She had heard of the discovery but had never seen it in person. Hot running water, flush toilets. The prince was a rich man indeed.

With the library well lit, Elly explored the shelves. She read each spine carefully. There were many books on the history and laws of Alaeotis, on witches, fae trickery, cursecraft, and various trades.

She found the books on astrology and astronomy, as well as a record of definitions. She knew even before opening the books that they would be rife with complicated words that she would need explained to her.

Elly gathered three tomes in her arms and found a comfortable couch by a window, with a table. She stretched out along the couch and began to peruse the pages.

There were innumerable stars in the night sky. So many that nobody could ever hope to name them all, so it became necessary to group them into constellations and weave easily digestible mythologies around them.

She read about the sinful serpent who wriggled across the sky every night as a celestial band of dust cut through the darkness. When her father told her of the serpent he would tickle her ribs and she would giggle and shriek. The memory brought a smile to Elly’s lips.

The rodent was sneaky, sometimes the star that symbolised his eye was red, sometimes white, and sometimes invisible. It changed with his mood. It made her think of Walter, scurrying back and forth in the cold root cellar, his tiny claws scratching her skirts.

The horse took up a large quadrant of the sky, and stood just under the moon. He supported the moon on his back every night to keep it from falling down into the sea. The horse was sturdy and reliable.

There were so many stars that did not have their home in a constellation, which fascinated Elly. How does one discover a star? Describe it? Name it?

Though a slow reader, Elly was engrossed and didn't realize that the actual stars had come out. She had been here all afternoon! What time was it? Did she miss supper? Why had no one come to fetch her?

Or…oh no.

Elly put the ribbon between the pages to hold her place then hurried out of the library. How could she be so irresponsible? The prince was probably waiting for his dinner right now. Of course she had to earn her keep, why wouldn't she? The prince had allowed her time to lounge and now she had work to do. Everything had a price.

She rushed from the library and up the stairs, taking them two at a time. She very well couldn't cook in this dress so she had to find something more suitable.

The palatial manor was just as labyrinthine as the hedge maze, which room was hers again?

She tested door after heavy oak door. Some were locked, some opened to rooms unused or unfamiliar to Elly.

Finally she found her room, identifiable by the ruined ball gown hanging on the wardrobe and the black suede shoes at the foot of the bed.

Elly stopped when she saw the new easel standing by the window, and the stack of canvases and sketchpads leaning against the wall. On a side table there was a small fortune of paints, charcoal and coloured chalk. A proud collection of quills, pens with nibs of different sizes and notebooks were lined up on the table as well along with generously sized pots of ink. Next to them was a card. Elly picked It up.

*To Mademoiselle Elody DeVerre,*
*Do not hesitate to indulge in your passions.*
*-A. Thorn*

Elly wanted nothing more than to do just as the card advised; to dip brushes into paint and swirl colours all over the blank canvas. To trace lines over and over with charcoal until a face formed from the white. To break the spines of new book bindings and hear the satisfying scratch of pen nibs on fresh paper.

After. Duty called.

Elly moved quick as she could without running because that was unbecoming. Finally, she found the kitchen and burst through the door, to the surprise of Jillian.

"Something the matter, dear?" Jillian asked as she basted a couple of small birds cooking in the oven.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Elly rushed to where she assumed the aprons would be hanging, but found none. "I suppose I lost track of time."

"Supper is not for another few hours." Jillian said, her face tied up in a quizzical expression. "Did you enjoy your time in the library?"

Elly said, "I'm here to help. What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing." Jillian put the birds back in the oven and mixed up something in a pot. "Unless you want to be my official taste tester."

Elly paused. "I'm… not supposed to make supper?"

"Oh, heavens, no." Jillian said.

Elly stood there, at a loss for what to do. "Shall I set the table then?"

With a loud, sudden clang, Jillian banged her wooden spoon on the rim of the pot to clean it of any mess then lay it aside. "Elly, my sweet girl,

you’re a guest. You’re not a servant. Allow yourself some relaxation. Now. Dinner will be in about two hours. Maybe tonight, wear the green dress.”

# TWENTY TWO

“DID YOU ENJOY YOUR gift?” Ashton said from the other side of the hedge wall.

Elly twisted her napkin in her hands and stared down at the small, succulent looking bird on her plate. “I appreciate it greatly, your grace. But I’ve done nothing to earn it. And, such high quality supplies– I, I don’t deserve such luxury.”

“What makes you say that?” His teacup clicked on his saucer.

“I’m not worth such nice things.”

“According to whom?”

Elly hesitated. “Forgive me, your grace, but I don’t have an answer for you.”

“Then there is no harm in you enjoying the gift. Whoever deems you unworthy of joy isn’t here. They’ll never know.”

Prince Ashton’s words brought with them a comfort. Yet Elly could not fully shed the feeling that this was wrong. Forbidden, maybe?

“However, someone with more skill or stature should have such quality items.”

“Then let us test your skill. I commission a charcoal portrait. Of myself. A commission from the crown is the highest honour any artist could hope to achieve. Thus, your stature is raised.”

“That seems like a loophole.” Though Elly admired the crafty way of thinking.

“Merely the incidental effect of being a prince. Do you accept?”

Elly perked, this could be a chance to see him face to face. “You would sit in front of me for hours?”

“No. You are to do the portrait from memory.” He slurped his tea. “What better way to test your skill?”

Had Elly been back in the root cellar with her sketchbook, she knew she’d end up drawing the prince anyway, so she could at least justify it.

“Name your price,” said Ashton. “Money is no object.”

“Money doesn’t motivate me,” Elly said. “I want to see you. Face to face. I want to be able to judge my accuracy with my own eyes.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Mademoiselle.”

“Then I reject your request.” To keep herself from taking back her words, Elly sipped her tea. “I suppose you’re going to have to return all those fine art supplies, or find them another home.”

The prince sighed. “They were a gift. And with that gift came a note. Have you forgotten what it said?”

“I hadn’t. And I’m not intending to be obstinate,” she added quickly. “It’s just that I find it very difficult to be… happy.”

“You wear your mask well, then,” the prince said. “You had me fooled during the ball.”

Elly twisted her napkin tighter. “That was the closest I had come to feeling genuine happiness for a long time.”

Silence mingled with the steam rising from the teacups and the sweet scents of the garden.

“It seems we’re both hiding from things. I’m told friendship is built on commonalities.”

Elly chewed her lip and laughed softly. The prince was certainly a witty one.

“I enjoy hearing you laugh,” Ashton said.

Elly’s cheeks burned red and the butterflies that always awoke when in the presence of Ashton Thorn fluttered around wild enough to create a tornado within her. “Thank you, my prince.”

“Very well. I acquiesce to your terms. We will meet face to face. *After* you complete the portrait and deliver it to me.”

Elly smiled. “It will be done within seven days, my lord.”

# TWENTY THREE

ELLY WOKE TO A strange and unfamiliar realization. She wasn't upset that she was awake. She didn't begrudge the looming day. The curtains were open and the dawn sun was pouring into her room. Normally that would annoy her but the sky was so beautiful that a part of her felt lucky to even see it. She tossed off the covers, went to the window and looked down at the still-waking city below. Her crows were on their usual perch on the sill, demanding bits of her breakfast. She inhaled the fresh morning air, the scent of the forest that flanked the manor.

Elly was happy that she hadn't died in her sleep.

After Jillian brought her a hearty breakfast of crepes, cheeses, ham and eggs, and the requested bread for the crows, Elly indulged in a morning soak to feel fresh for the day.

Clean and dressed, she set up her easel and supplies and began work on his portrait.

She started with blocking out basic shapes for his figure to pose, then sketched the guiding lines of his face. Then, she focused in on his eyes.

From memory, she drew out the eyelids, the fan of his eyelashes, the way his brow merged with his cheekbone and together they made the perfect orbit around his eye.

She drew the sharp bridge of his nose and the perfect tip of it. She remembered the way it pressed to her body, pushing back the defenses of her fragile little seed so that he may pleasure her.

The way his mouth, with lips she drew as full and proud as she could, wearing a secret half-grin that hid a clever and devious tongue.

The charcoal rounded the cliff of his statuesque jaw, where his chin cast shadows down the column of his neck. She palmed the smudges along shoulders she knew to be extremely broad because she had practically drowned in his structured coat that night where they walked in the garden.

The chisel of his collar bones, the meaty plateaus of his pectorals, then she pulled down the white and black into the gully of his tight abs which disappeared into a mystery of curls.

Elly stepped back to admire her work. She took it all in, then realized that she had drawn prince Ashton Thorn nude!

“Oh shit.” She licked her lips. She tried to look away but couldn’t. This was not an appropriate portrait to give to the prince. She should probably destroy it. Could her portrait be considered treason in some way? Elly didn’t know but the very chance that it could demand the art be destroyed. It seemed like such a shame to waste a canvas, and even ignoring the subject matter, Elly had to admit it was some of her finest work.

She forced herself to take the canvas from the easel. Quickly, she slid it under the bed. This one would be just for her.

“How is the commission coming along?” On the other side of the hedge wall, Ashton Thorn tapped his spoon on the rim of his teacup.

Elly bit into a layered wafer cookie. It was flavored of chocolate and strawberries and too sinfully delicious to be of this earth. She chewed quickly and swallowed.

“More difficult than I first imagined it to be,” she admitted. “But, it will be done. Though it would be so much easier if you were to come model for me in person.” A sly smirk curved her lips.

“You know the terms of this arrangement,” Ashton said briskly. He sighed but it seemed to Elly that it sounded mildly amused. “You have four days left.”

Four days, and then she would see his beautiful face again, and unfortunately unveil her own hideous self. She forced the thought away.

“I plan to visit the library this afternoon. You are free to join me,” Elly offered.

“Some other time.” Then, he added, with that same mild amusement, “next week, perhaps?”

Elly smiled against her teacup. “Perhaps.”

“I propose a compromise: What if we do the unveiling of the portrait in the library?” He suggested.

“There’s nowhere else in this manor that’s more…you? No inner sanctum?”

“Oh, you *have* been reading,“ he chuckled. “There is one place,” he said. “I’ll have monsieur Dupont escort you the day of. Shall we say…one

o’clock? From there we can enjoy our usual afternoon tea.”

Tea time face to face? Elly couldn’t refuse.

# TWENTY FOUR

ELLY VENTURED DEEPER INTO the library than she ever had before. She meandered among shadowy shelves where the light didn't reach as strong. Here was where she found the forbidden texts that Ashton had told her of. Bawdy tales of pirates taking women for their own pleasures. Kings with his three dozen young wives, who would take turns servicing him night after night. Barbarians who would wrestle until their armor and weapons were shattered and the only way to subdue the other was through crazed thrusting. Elly selected one about the turning of the seasons, where the satyrs and the forest nymphs drank and danced to make the flowers bloom.

She took the novel to a plush sofa across from an elaborate oversized framed looking glass. Doubtless one of Prince Ashton's art pieces. She opened the book and began to read of the wily frolicking of the forest spirits. One satyr pinned a nymph to the trunk of a tree, just to have her melt into the bark and appear in the branches above where she reached down and tugged on his horn. Another nymph had a satyr strung up with

vines and played hide the acorns in the fur of his lap. Everyone giggled as they teased that a satyr's flute was never just a flute.

Elly turned the page to find the book alive with an illustration of their natural games. Nymphs had satyrs in their mouths, or rode them like mounts while they lay on their backs. They twisted up together in unproductive but very enjoyable looking poses. A tangle of too many figures were happily writhing, the illustration done so lovingly it almost seemed to move. An endless circle of licking.

Elly imagined what the soft fur of the satyr's legs might feel like. She remembered the beast in the forest, staring down at her. His fur seemed thick and soft. Did he have a mate? If so, how did they…

Her finger traced the drawings, then she licked those same fingers to turn the page. She licked her fingers on her other hand, then sent them to search under her skirts for naked skin.

She drank in the words that told of tales of naughty nymphs and virile satyrs, of rutting and thrusting and tongues that washed against skin. Her body pulsed with the want of it all. Her pussy, wet and needy, ached at the thought of–

Elly was startled by a grunt from the far wall but when she looked there was nothing but the smooth, silvery mirror. Though, she couldn't escape the sense she was being watched. Her skin burned with embarrassment, and yet… she didn't want to stop. The idea of being watched, even clandestinely, was thrilling. What harm could it do? At worst, Jillian's husband was watching her, or Jillian herself and the kindly woman deserved some naughty entertainment. But it could be Ashton himself watching and he had already seen more than a share of her body…

Being desired, lusted for…merely *wanted* made Elly feel very charitable.

She watched the mirror, watched herself, and pulled up her skirts to expose what had been hidden beneath. In the bath, she had razored away all her hair from her legs, underarms and her sex, as the whores had done to keep clean and free of illness. Her naked pink arousal was dewy and glistening. She went to touch it when a cloud of fog bloomed on the surface of the mirror.

Breath?

It blossomed in a place too tall for a human to reach. It pulsed in that one spot for many moments, then moved down, low, tiny explosions of white mist blemishing the flawless silver glass until the blossoming breath came to a pulsing halt over the reflection of her exposed womanhood.

Elly rose from the couch, her fingers still dancing against her pink sex. She stood before the mirror and passed her fingers up and down along her slit, dragging the supple folds up, pushing them down, parting herself, holding herself open and exposed to the fogging glass. She slid a finger inside, then another. She sunk into herself to the third knuckle, out, slender fingers wet and glinting in the electric light. The fog continued to pulse and Elly was almost certain she heard some sort of steady grunting sound.

Her fingers ventured in and out faster, louder, drips of her juices falling to the hardwood floor. She whimpered, her body tightened and she cried out Ashton’s name as she orgasmed, leaning her forehead against the glass. A fine mist of droplets like diamond dust shone on the mirror.

Upon returning to her room, Elly saw a box on her bed. She picked up the card that rested on top and read it.

*To quell your fears.*

*-A. Thorn*

She opened the box and inside, wrapped in a soft brown rabbit pelt was a work of art. She carefully lifted it from the box and admired it in the lamp light.

It was fire, made of glass. A tight, dancing flame wild and asymmetrical but the anatomy of it was fluid. The glass was coloured with vibrant reds and oranges and yellows before fading into pure, smooth clarity. A flame that would never burn her, never scar her.

And he made it. Just for her…

# TWENTY FIVE

A SMALL GRAVEYARD OF abandoned portraits lined the walls of Elly's bedroom, each in various stages of completion. Another lay under her bed next to the nude drawing. That one was of the beast and she felt possessed to draw it after the night with the mirror. Drawing it had felt… not wrong exactly, but forbidden. Certainly unbecoming. Whatever had happened at the mirror that night was certainly not done by a human, and she had felt observed as she walked the halls of this mansion.

She had encountered the beast three times, and in each meeting, he never harmed her. What she had said to Prince Ashton was true, Beasts and Monsters were not always the same thing.

It was well into the night before the deadline when Elly finally completed a suitable portrait of Prince Ashton Thorn. Exhausted, she stripped from her dress and simply fell into bed and bundled up while she let the painting dry.

Elly woke to the call of the crows in the mid-early morning. She threw on her robe and checked to see if the paint was still tacky. It was dry as old wood and she smiled with satisfaction. She draped a sheet over it, and

began her morning routine of a hot bath, breakfast that Jillian brought her, and making friends with the selfish crows.

She had hours before the one in the afternoon tea time, but the wait made the anxiety so much worse.

She spent most of the time deciding on the perfect dress. She would, after all, meet her prince again tonight.

Ashton had said he liked the colour blue on her. Should she wear it? Or would that be predictable? Red was a romantic colour, but perhaps too forward for a first meeting.

Elly chose a deep purple dress with a black diamond chequered pattern on the underskirt. The neckline was high, and the sleeves long. She let her hair down but with Jillian's help, put half of it in two elaborate braids that combined into one. Finally, she selected a purple veil with black lace trim that she affixed into place with a comb. Then, Jillian had to leave to prepare the tea time treats.

Elly was putting on the final touches, making certain not a hair was out of place, when Jaques, Jillian's husband and the butler of the manor, knocked on the door.

"Tea time," Jaques said. He crossed the room and stood in front of the covered canvas. "Is this the piece?"

"It is," Elly's voice trembled.

Carefully, Jaques lifted the covered canvas, sheet and all, and tucked it under his arm. He collapsed the easel and headed out. "Come along, Mademoiselle DeVerre."

Elly kept pace with Jaques, and together they made their way down the familiar halls en route to the library. Elly frowned under her veil. Did they not say somewhere more personal?

“Are you enjoying your stay here?” Jaques asked. “Are you finding everything to your liking?”

“Very much so, thank you. It’s wonderful.”

“That’s good, then,” Jaques said.

Without hesitation, Jaques steered them into the library and he approached the wall that displayed the mirror. Elly mused silently that the mirror had been polished, and not a sign of her depravity remained. Her cheeks burned. Who had endured that unpleasant task? She should apologise.

“Mademoiselle DeVerre, if you could please assist me, my hands are full.”

Elly came to Jaques’ side as requested.

“Can you please turn that glass wolf a quarter to the left?” Jaques nodded to a beautifully detailed glass statuette. The wolf stood on three legs, the front left paw raised and curled. Head thrown back, it was forever howling at an unseen moon. The base was carved stone. Elly moved it left.

There was a click, and the entire shelf popped inward an inch or two. Elly stepped back with a gasp but Jaques pushed the shelf with a foot and it swung on a hinge like any normal door. Jaques entered and Elly followed.

The room was a large study, a little dim but with a warm atmosphere. It smelled of leather and oak and magic lamps stood here and there. The walls were of a dark brown wood and the hardwood floor was polished to a shine. There was a fireplace with a lazy fire burning within, leather seating and fine oak and granite tables. The large windows were decorated with deep red dressings tied with golden cords.

Displayed on the walls were many hunting trophies. The heads of several large deer with intimidating antlers. Bear skins lay on the floor, fox and

rabbit pelts were placed on the back of the sofas for extra flair. Animal skulls hung like masks in row after row. A large stuffed grizzly stood on either side of the hearth. Bats were preserved under glass and frame, entire rat skeletons groomed themselves under bell jars, a snake of bone coiled around a petrified branch.

In the centre of the room was the usual afternoon tea spread, only this time it was one table and two chairs. To look upon it brought Elly fresh butterflies. Next to it, Jaques set up the easel and the portrait, then draped a sheet over to protect it.

Elly turned to drink in the room and the wall behind her was not solid wood, but a glass window that looked into the library, in easy view of the setee. So, someone *had* been spying on her.

"The prince will arrive momentarily. Have a good afternoon," Jaques slipped through the hidden shelf-door, and Elly watched through the window as he left the library.

Soon, there was the sound of a door opening, and fresh light cut through the room. Then, the path of light narrowed, vanished and the door shut with a satisfying click. Elly couldn't bring herself to turn around and face Prince Ashton as he walked across the room. Toward her.

Elly heard the whisper of the sheet lift from the canvas. She held her breath.

"Is this how you see me?" It was Ashton's voice, the same as it was in the gardens.

"Does it please you, my prince?" Elly couldn't move. Why couldn't she move? All she could do was breathe, her heart pounding in her chest.

"It's exceptional. Well done."

A shadow fell over her and, faintly, an image reflected into half-formed clarity in the glass wall. A large, burly shape, brandishing two sets of horns. Something that could envelope every inch of her.

“Elly,” he said.

“Prince Ashton.” Elly supposed in a way she had always known, but she didn’t give the thought credence because it sounded mad.

“You saw through your end of our deal. This is what you asked for,” he said.

“Yes,” Elly wasn’t sure she formed a word, or just exhaled a breath.

His large clawed hands came over her shoulders and picked at the lacey hem of her veil. He lifted it up off her face and folded it over so it hung down her back.

Elly turned around, her head downcast, doing what she could to hide her scars. A knuckle on his large clawed index finger nudged her chin up and she looked at him.

He was the beast. The same as in the forest and the river and the labyrinth. The wildcat mane she remembered in the woods was brushed, the streaks of grey streaming through the thick black. It was braided in places, and dotted with adornments here and there such as beads. On his horns he wore rings like tiny crowns that would otherwise never fit on his head. His lean, narrow wolf’s face was blanketed in fur the colour of a red fox, but the firelight brought out the hints of gold.

He was dressed in a cloak coloured the royal green of the Thorn name, and a leather vest with buttons made of bone. His pants were leather, but torn where the digitigrade joints liked to bend. He wore no shoes, but seemed careful not to leave claw marks on the floor.

She took a breath again, and didn't fight him as he looked down at her full face, scars and all.

"Shall we enjoy our tea?" the prince asked.

"I would love to," Elly said.

He pulled out the chair for her and Elly sat. He settled across from her.

"Allow me to formally introduce myself. Prince Ashton is my true self. When I am trapped in this cursed form, I am called Thorn. Something ugly and cruel."

"Wild," Elly countered.

"Unwanted."

"Unpredictable."

"Why are you saying such things? I am a monstrous thing to be feared."

"Just because you look a certain way doesn't mean you're fearsome. Or even unpleasant."

"If you truly believed that, you would not be wearing that veil even now."

In this game of wits, Thorn had scored a point. He was right of course. She had been so used to hiding her own ugliness it was deeper even than second nature. Ever since she was scarred, Fiona had told her to hide away.

*No one wants to see such ugliness.*

As if speaking her thoughts and making them real, Thorn said, "there is no one here to see whatever it is you're trying to hide."

Elly took a deep breath through her nose and out her slightly parted pink lips. She trembled in her seat, as his blue wolfish gaze roved over her swirl of scars. She toyed with her hair and it cascaded along her disfigured cheek.

"Don't hide," Thorn said.

With a hand shaking like a leaf on a gentle breeze, she brushed her hair behind her ears. Her head was bowed and her eyes focused on the little strawberry shortcakes on her plate.

“This food is beautiful.” She observed for want of something to say. Her voice seemed meek and fragile in her ears. The echo brought by the large study hall made it worse. “Is it your favourite? I could learn to make it.”

“Do you enjoy cooking?” he asked.

“I strive to please people.” That was the most diplomatic way Elly could think to phrase it.

“Is that so?”

Elly felt captured by his dark wolfish stare. It was unblinking, predatory, but not in a dangerous way. Not in a way that sought to cause harm. Not the way Fiona would stare at her. This was interested, possessive. No, not possessive… Elly didn’t have a word for it. It made her stomach flutter. Thorn was still speaking.

“And, how would you propose to please me?”

“However you’d like.” Elly’s mind jumped to the obvious; that every man wanted a willing and obedient plaything. She feared, being a virgin, that she would not be able to satisfy that desire, so she tried to steer the negotiations toward her strengths. “Cleaning, laundry, polish–”

“I don’t want you to hide any longer.” He bit a fluffy bite of shortcake from his fork.

Elly paused. “This would please you?”

“It would.”

Elly grinned. “Yes, I could see how having to look at me in the face would make anybody feel better about themselves.”

His eyes turned dark and focused.

Elly swallowed her smile.

“And I forbid you from speaking in such a manner in my presence.” His words were solid and commanding, but not unkind. “Or while you set foot on any property I own. That includes the manor, the gardens and even the forest.” He sipped his tea, then added calmly, “Technically I own that as well.”

She could no longer hide, and she could no longer mock herself. Thorn was stripping away her defences. She tightened the grip on her teaspoon and her knuckles turned white. “I don’t know how to do that.” She admitted in a whisper.

“The books in my library,” he began. “I don’t have such a collection because I am perverse. I collect them because they provide a connection to the part of me that is human. I have no one. No friends or family. And when I see myself I… well, it is hard to remember that within this horrible form is a man just like any other. You just have to find something that gives you a connection to who you really are.”

“Now that you mention it,” Elly smiled keenly. “Those books were rather captivating.”

Thorn grinned slightly. “And who was it you found connection with? The maidens or the satyrs?”

“I think we both know the answer to that.”

They shared a laugh, and from there, conversations flowed between them like water, about books, and the sort of things found in the town market, the ratio of blue and red paint for a royal purple, the benefits of different kinds of crochet hooks. The patient art of embroidery and cross-stitch and how to perfectly laminate dough and fold it into a flawless croissant.

Afternoon tea turned into evening drinks and Jaques wheeled in a beautiful glass and gold drink trolly. At tableside, he mixed them both a sharp, fruity drink in equally beautiful wine glasses with golden stems.

“Shall we a toast?” Elly suggested. “To… Being seen.”

Thorn raised his glass. “To being seen.” They touched glasses and a pure sound rang through the room.

Elly now saw Thorn wasn’t acting cheeky when slurping his drinks. His face was wolf-like, with four sharp tusks protruding from his bottom jaw and scything upward. Of course drinking would be difficult.

Elly took a drink and lowered her glass but missed the table. She watched in horror as the wineglass fell, then shattered in hundreds of shards against the floor.

She dropped out of her seat and onto her knees and immediately began gathering the broken glass with her bare hands. The red wine seeped into the skirt of her dress.

*Stupid. Clumsy. Useless! An embarrassment! Why did you even get out of bed today?*

With each mental admonishment she hit her fist to her chest.

*Thump. Thump. Th–*

His hand closed around her fist. This was it, he was enraged. He was going to banish her from his manor. She had squandered his generosity by breaking his things. Even if it was an accident, it was inexcusable, indefensible. She could not bare to raise her head and see the anger in his eyes.

He yanked her away from the glass with so little effort she might as well be a rag doll. Elly was ensconced in warm fur and a hard body, his thundering heartbeat against her ear now her whole world.

“Why do you do that to yourself?” Thorn’s voice was shaking.

“I… broke the glass.” Elly’s voice was small.

“It was an accident. We can get it replaced.”

*We can get it replaced*. Fiona would have said something along the lines of *now I have to replace it,* or, *You will work off the cost of replacing it, Elody.* The idea that it was such a non-issue, so inconsequential made Elly’s toes go numb. Her fist slowly unfurled and her fingers brushed through the coarse fur of his mane. She remembered how warm it was under the gazebo. How safe.

“I’ve been drawn to you ever since I first saw you.”

“At the ball?” His voice was husky and throaty.

“In the forest. You saved my life, you know.”

“You would have drowned otherwise.”

“That was the first time,” Elly admitted. “The second time… I had planned to, after the ball, fill my dress with rocks and jump off the bridge.”

He held her a little tighter. “Who did this to you?”

Saying it felt like a betrayal. It felt vindictive and petty. She should be grateful that Fiona had taken her in, kept a roof over her head and fed her. “It doesn’t matter.”

A low rumble grew in his chest. “It matters to me.”

Elly trembled in his arms. This was frightening. People had shown her kindness before, but not like this. Having worth was not easy to believe.

“Just hold me.” Elly buried her face in his chest and gripped his fur.

And he did. Thorn sat with her, cradling her until the trembling and worthlessness subsided.

“...Fiona L’argent.”

“You were a prostitute?”

Elly grimaced. “Does that disgust you?”

“I find it kind of exciting, to be honest,” Thorn answered.

Elly allowed herself the smallest of chuckles. “No. Her servant. She married my father when I was young. He died when I was eight and she rebuilt our home and his land into the brothel. She never turned me out or made me service customers. I always had a place to sleep and food… She was gracious.”

“So gracious that you hurt yourself when you make a mistake and planned to die rather than return,” Thorn pointed out.

“You don’t know what it was like. She did what she could. My ugly face would have turned away customers. I was given no less than I deserved.”

“You deserved so much more than that, Elly.”

When she said nothing, Thorn grabbed her hair in his fist and pulled her head to look up at him. It was swift and commanding but not painful. His gaze was soft. A tiny gasp escaped Elly before her heart caught in her throat. He cupped her face in his paw, his clawed thumb stroking the scars that rested there like spiderwebs on a skull. His touch sent jolts of hypersensation through the neglected, dormant flesh.

“Say it.”

“I…” Elly became keenly aware of her sex growing slick. “I deserve more.”

Then, Thorn said two words that sent a thrilling shiver of delight through her body that left her too weak to stand.

“Good girl.”

From that moment, there was no fighting it. Elly’s heart belonged to Thorn forever.

# TWENTY SIX

THE FOLLOWING MORNING ELLY woke to the newly established routine of Jillian bringing her breakfast. Embarrassed, Elly pulled the covers up to her nose.

"Madame Dupont, you don't have to do this. I can make my own meals."

"It's alright dear, I thrive on routine." She placed the tray on the table. Cornbread and bacon and yogurt with fresh berries. "I don't think of it as servitude, I think of it as motherhood. It gives me purpose."

Elly sat up in bed. "I never had a mother. Mine died giving birth to me."

Jillian gave a sad smile. "She would have adored you."

But then the woman was all business. "Prince Thorn has something planned for you. It's no place to be wearing a dress so I brought you these." She placed some folded garments on a chair. "Get ready, eat, and meet me in the front foyer at ten. And wear your hair in a braid or bun. Something out of the way."

Elly did as she was told, having her nice warm morning soak, and enjoying breakfast with her crows. Word had gotten out that there was food

here and the crows had brought friends. What began as two or three black birds had now grown to seven. They were loud, abrasive and made Elly smile.

Finally Elly looked at the clothes Jillian had brought: a leather jerkin, leather pants and hearty boots. She dressed and braided her hair. She made her bed, and took her dishes to the kitchen where she washed them herself.

Come ten o'clock in the morning, Elly found Jillian waiting in the foyer.

"Follow me, please." Jillian led Elly along the east wing of the mansion, then up a flight of spiralling stairs. They were four stories above ground. Elly recognized the familiar scent of fresh air found outside of attic windows. It didn't last long, because soon the air grew hot and oppressive. Each step became warmer and warmer. The air thickened in her lungs. Beads of sweat popped onto her forehead and under her arms. She tried to convince herself it was from the heat but Elly knew it was from fear.

They crested the top of the stairs and Elly found herself in a large room with one wall made entirely of glass windows, and part of the roof was glass as well. The windows were open to allow for ventilation and fresh cool air, but the room was still sweltering.

The room housed rows and rows of tall wooden shelves, each displaying dozens of glass items. Goblets, figurines, abstract objects, wind chimes, all in more colours than Elly thought possible for glass.

The mobiles danced in the breeze of the open windows and caught the sun. Shifting rainbows moved through the room.

Built into the corner on the far side of the room was a large domed-shaped furnace made of stone. There, Thorn stood, shirtless, sweat escaping the tangle of quills and mane around his shoulders and rolling down his back between his shoulder blades. The sweat gave the impression of

morning dew on blades of grass before dawn. He looked over his shoulder and saw her. Captured in his gaze, Elly felt faint. She told herself it was just the heat.

“Come closer.” As he spoke, Thorn pulled a metal rod from the furnace. On the end was impaled a red-hot ball of solid fire which startled Elly and her pace grew slow and cautious.

He placed the hot end on a sort of marble block and rolled it around a little, like a rolling pin to pie dough, only there was no dough.

Thorn placed the end of a flexible tube in his mouth and blew. From within the magma-hot egg of fire bloomed a fragile little bubble. The molten glass expanded and Elly watched as he used various tools and movements to stretch and shape it. His ear flicked in his concentration, sending drops of sweat flying until they hit the wall of the furnace and sizzled into nothing.

He grunted, tilted his head and then plunged the half formed project back into the furnace. “Not quite right.” He murmured, speaking around the tube tucked between two sharp carnivorous molars.

He pulled out another oblong of solid heat and rolled it along the marble again. He plucked the tube from his mouth. “Give it a try.”

Elly blinked. Sweat trickled down her throat, overflowed on her collarbone and sank between her breasts. “Oh, no I could never…”

“It’s easier than it looks.” Thorn held the tube out to her. “Just breathe evenly.”

Elly hesitated, casting distrustful looks at the small Hell within the furnace. She inched closer and took the tube. She placed it in her mouth and closed her lips.

“Now, breathe out.”

Elly exhaled into the tube while Thorn rolled the knot of jellied glass. She watched as she breathed life into the fire, the air from her lungs trapped and surrounded by impossible heat but fighting through it, pushing against it.

“Perfect,” Thorn said softly.

The praise, the temperature, the smell of his sweat, it all made Elly’s body pulse with need. A need she would have to keep to herself. It nagged at her but she was able to bury it down as, before her eyes, Thorn turned a dangerous orb of burning glass into a delicate drinking goblet that was identical to the one she had accidentally shattered.

“That is incredible,” Elly said in awe.

“You showed interest at the ball, I thought you would like to take part.”

Her heart hammered in her chest. She wiped her eyes and pretended it was just sweat blurring her vision.

“Thank you for this. For including me in…in your life. Your interests. No one has ever…shared their passions with me. Not like this.”

As Elly looked up at him, her mind drifted to chocolate. She thought about the time she managed to swindle the three chocolate bars from her step sisters. She didn’t think of it as stealing but rather giving them to herself. Allowing herself to have them. It was this same logic that permissed her to press her mouth against his right tusk. She withdrew and a beat passed between them.

She grabbed the front locks of his mane and pulled him into another kiss while his strong arms wrapped around her slight body and he lifted her up. Her legs entangled around his broad torso for stability and she took hold of one of his horns for further security.

“Not here,” Thorn said.

“I don’t know that I have the strength to go anywhere else,” Elly admitted in a breathy voice.

“Then I will carry you.”

Thorn held her, and Elly folded up like a bride in his strong arms. She felt safe and secure. She felt wanted and not like she was some burden to be shouldered.

“Where should we go?” Thorn asked.

Elly couldn’t take her eyes from his face. “Wherever you want to take me.”

Thorn took Elly to the master bedroom which was practically an entire living quarters. It was bigger than Fiona’s bedroom by a generous amount and instead of cold and cavernous it was dark and mysterious.

Except for the bed.

The early afternoon light from the window cut a knife through the dark and illuminated the massive oak four poster bed. Thorn walked to it and lay Elly on the goose down comforter. She felt like she was sinking into a marshmallow.

Thorn left her there, and one by one he untied the curtains bound to the posts. He drew them closed until the two of them were locked in their own private world.

“I’ve… never done this before,” Elly admitted.

“I’ve never done this before while in this form,” Thorn told her. “So, in a way, it’s a first time for both of us.”

That made Elly smile, and Thorn pulled her boots off her feet and tossed them beyond the curtain and into the oblivion on the other side.

Next he peeled off her leather pants, and exposed her bare legs, still slightly shining from sweat.

His goat ears flattened and he bared his sharp teeth in what could only be called a devilish grin.

His claws went to her jerkin and he tore it open as easily as it had been the wax paper that was wrapped around a bar of chocolate. For a moment, Elly felt as desirable as chocolate. That was until her breasts spilled out. With a gasp, Elly covered her ample chest with her arms and looked away.

Thorn's grin faded and he tilted his head. "What's the matter?"

Every jeering comment Fiona had ever made in regards to Elly's body ran through mind. Her shameful endowments, how tight the bindings had been wrapped. The ghost of the bruises tickled her ribs. And that was to say nothing of the strained webbing of scars that she got before she began to develop. The skin was tight and forced her left breast to drift aside. Her pink nipple pointed leftwards rather than forward. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "They're ugly and embarrassing."

Thorn took her scarred hand in his, black sickle-like claws retracted. "Whoever told you that is a liar." That grin half-returned, his fang glinting in the dim light that passed through the curtains. He parted his jaws and ran his tongue over her palm and down her arm, tracing the whirl of the scars as he went.

He shifted so he was looming over her, his weight on his digitigrade feet. The mattress sunk under them.

His muzzle caressed her neck as his tongue traced the scars on her shoulder. His thick mane tickled her cheek but Elly liked it. She couldn't

resist, and turned her head to bury her face in the dark fur. She breathed in and smelled a primal musk, a heat that had a *fragrance*. Elly stifled a moan. She bent her knee and teased his groin with her leg, shocked by the size of the bulge in his pants.

Taking the hint, Thorn unlaced his pants and produced himself. Curious, Elly peeked from the garden of his mane to get a look. It was nothing like the ones she had seen at the brothel.

It was as thick as her wrist, and a peculiar but not unappealing deep red colour. It was similar to a human's anatomy but the head was more spade-like than mushroomed.

Elly was about to speak, to admit that she didn't think she could accept it all, when he took her left breast into his maw.

She moaned, unable to hide it this time. His teeth, sharp and deadly as knives, ran gently along her flesh. His tongue slid across her nipple, rolling it back and forth. His hand took her other breast, cradling it perfectly. Her breasts were perfectly sized to his beastly hands.

She reached down and took hold of his shaft. Her fingers were barely able to reach around the circumference. It was so warm, and solid but covered in a layer of satiny flesh. Under the head ran three ridges, and a track of raised spaded ridges ran down the underside of the shaft. As her fingers rolled over the unfamiliar landscape of him, she imagined what those ridges would feel like deep inside; rubbing against her slick walls over and over, the depths that spaded head could reach…

"I…I don't think I can take the whole th– *uhn!*"

Thorn pressed the ridged underside of the shaft against her sex and her mound parted like a sticky bun under a knife. Elly spread her thighs wider

and the prince rutted against her, his cock sliding against her slit and her toned belly.

She wrapped her fingers around the head to caress the sensitive organ. She constricted and loosened her hand with each piston of his member, cupping the top of the spaded head as he pulled back, and sliding her palm down as he thrust forward. It barely took any time at all until her hand was soaked with his clear, slick pre-cum.

Elly's arousal coated Thorn as well, slippery and leaving him with a shimmering film that also found its way onto her thighs and tummy. She grabbed onto one of his horns and pulled him close. She pressed her forehead to his.

Thorn shifted, abandoning Elly's sex. She whimpered at the sudden neglect, but moaned when he took a breast in each clawed hand. His tongue lolled from his mouth and licked a trail of saliva along her sternum. He perched over her and lay his cock between her bountiful breasts.

Elly gasped as the red spaded tip of his organ repeatedly came at her. Above her, Thorn threw his head back and moaned in delight. Her humiliating breasts were bringing her prince pleasure. She lay there, arousal growing in the pit of her at the idea of his happiness. Her pussy twitched and her chest heaved, her skin grew hot. She just knew she was dripping onto the silk bed sheets.

Thorn looked down at her, tongue out, panting, drool dripping onto her chest, making it even more slick.

Elly gazed up at him and extended her tongue. She caressed the underside of the tip of his cock with the flat of her tongue, cradled it, guiding him past her lips and into her mouth. She closed her lips around him and sucked every time he withdrew.

Thorn cursed in pleasure. Elly kept hold of one of his horns with her left hand while her right hand wrapped around the root of him. She gave a careful pull, tugging him closer. He shifted above her, his shadow falling over her as she took more of him into her mouth.

Elly willed herself to be still, to be obedient, to be a good girl and not choke, not make a single sound of discomfort. So many years spent unmoving, of numbing her own throat for the convenience and pleasure of others. It was very tight, and she couldn't breathe, but Elly took more than half of his length down her paralyzed throat. He looked down at her, and she gazed back up at him, pressing her lips around his shaft as he plunged himself in and out of her mouth.

A roar deafened Elly and her mouth filled with hot, sticky essence in such abundance that it flowed past her lips and down her cheeks. She swallowed what she could, not wishing to waste any of his precious virility so willingly given, but it was hopeless.

Thorn pulled from Elly's mouth fully, and returned to grinding into her cleavage. His thrusts continued, his organ shooting copious helpings of his thick white semen. It splashed against her scars, whiting them out, painting them away.

Elly lay there, a mess, panting, and looking up at her prince. Her fingers returned between her legs and adminstered gentle strokes, her other hand painting fingertip swirls in his come.

"Satisfied?"

"Not until you are." Thorn took Elly's hand from her pussy and pinned it to the mattress, then grabbed her waist and lifted her hips off the bed. He opened his mouth… and devoured her.

Elly's bottom was framed by his lower jaw, while his bottom tusks locked her thighs open. His tongue, long and flat tapered, lashed whiplike at her pussy. Hot breath blasted her exposed sex in waves, his nostrils flared over and over and his blue eyes would not break their gaze from her own.

Elly's knees bent and her feet rested on his horns, toes splayed along the ridges of them. His teeth kept her pinned in place, which was maddening because she wanted nothing more than to be able to grind against his tongue.

Words weren't words anymore, Elly couldn't make them, only sounds. Stressed, desperate, pleading moans or squeaks.

She came, sudden and hard, and knew that she had, for his efforts, released some fluids onto his tongue. A small, violent squirt of absolute pleasure and release. It made him growl and it made his eyes shine.

Her body was numb and she was powerless as, with great care, he opened his jaws and spit her out. Elly's hips and thighs and belly were dented with sharp fang-marks that went deep but didn't break skin. She shook, and she trembled."...Elly?" Thorn began. "...Did I hurt you?"

She dragged her focus back to him, his ears low with worry. Part of her was missing. A constant ache, a perception of ugliness. It was as if he had feasted upon it and tore it right out of her.

"Let's do it again."

The sounds of water hitting the tub was pleasant white noise as she pulled the soiled sheets from the bed. She didn't notice Thorn come up behind her until he placed his strong, spindley paw on her back between her naked

shoulder blades. With one quick shove she was bent over and pressed into the mattress. It wasn't hard or painful, but firm. His elbow was locked and he was massive enough that she was helpless and pinned. The scent of what they had just done lingered in the sheets and Elly's nipples hardened.

"What are you doing?" Thorn's voice was husky.

"The bedsheets need to be washed," Elly said.

"Are you thinking yourself my maid? We have people for such jobs."

*We*. Elly blushed and bit her lip. "Not a maid," she answered. "I helped make this mess. I'm just accepting responsibility for my part. And, well." She took a deep breath, the scent of their passion taking residence at the back of her aching throat. "This bed is beautiful. The sheets are so soft and silky. If I had such fine things, I would want to take care of them."

He cupped her naked ass with his free hand. His palm slid down the rounded flesh, then wedged to cup her dirty sex. She gasped as his palm pressed against her, as if she were riding a saddled horse. She couldn't stop herself from shifting a little, grinding herself against his big, leathery hand.

Thorn leaned over her until his muzzle was near her cheek. He removed his hand from between her shoulders but she didn't move. He took her hair in his hand and pulled her head back on her neck.

"Good girl."

With a whimper that Elly couldn't catch in time, his words sent another shudder of ecstasy to race through her body. A few drops of her pleasure pooled onto the hand that cradled her sex. He held her that way until the timid trembles subsided, then he gently let her go. She didn't move.

He brought his hand up and licked away the dewdrops she had left on him.

“Come,” Thorn turned to the tub that was still filling with hot water in the adjacent washroom. “Let’s get washed up.”

# TWENTY SEVEN

EXISTENCE BECAME A ROUTINE that Elly treasured. She would wake in the morning in her room, usually to the arrival of Jillian and breakfast. She would eat, bathe, and feed her crow friends, then prepare herself to see Thorn.

They would spend the day together, in the library, or in the gardens, sometimes even deep in the forest and he would tell her all about history, and geography, and places beyond the town of Perrault-Villeneuve. In turn, he would sit still in order for her to paint or draw him. They both still accepted the pretence that she was the official royal portrait artist, so she had a reason to stay, even though he could just ask her to stay, or forbid her to leave. Either option was agreeable to Elly.

Sometimes they would be so lost in their conversations that tea time was skipped, but they always had dinner and drinks together. Then, at night, she would follow him to his bed and they would take their time learning so much more about one another.

Tonight, Elly was naked, as she usually was this late in the hour, and resting on Thorn's chest, her fingers adventuring through the forest of the fur on his body. Thorn seemed a little distracted and Elly followed his eyeline to a portrait that hung above the fireplace at the other end of the room. It was of the king and queen. In the arms of the queen was a shape, swaddled in cloth the same colour as the Thorn crest. Prince Ashton Thorn as an infant.

"It troubles you, doesn't it?" Elly said.

Thorn's ears twitched as he blinked out of his meditation. "What?"

"That painting. I catch you looking at it every so often. If it troubles you, why not take it down?" Her mind flashed to the off-colour outlines of missing portraits that lined the walls of the brothel. Her own past was troublesome to Fiona. Was suggesting this making her and Fiona alike?

Thorn paused to reflect. "I suppose… because I loved them. They were so in love. Once my mother died, my father fell ill and just… didn't fight the sickness. He would rather die than stay around for me. I was only eighteen. I had so much to learn."

Elly frowned. Parents were supposed to love their children, weren't they? Certainly her father had loved her. Even Fiona loved her daughters. "That sounds like your parents shared a powerful love," she said, quietly.

Thorn took a deep breath. His lungs were so strong that Elly's weight was scarcely a burden on his expanding chest.

"So powerful that I knew I would never find a love like that. They told me that over and over. They, especially my mother, told me that no one could ever find it in their heart to love me."

Elly stoked the beard of his mane, as much for her own comfort as for his. “They never learned what a kind and gentle man you’ve become.”

“They said all I would ever be is a beast.”

Elly looked up at the painting again. The oil-pigment eyes glittered with love and devotion. If she looked hard enough at the painting, she could bring to mind the memory of Prince Ashton Thorn the night of the ball. In the portrait she could see echoes of his chin, the colour of his eyes, similar high cheekbones. Should she tell him so? Would that make him happy, or cause him pain?

“Jillian and Jaques say I look like them,” Thorn said.

“Now that you mention it…” A ghost of a smile traced Elly’s lips. “Do you think they would have approved of me?”

“No.” Thorn said. “They would have hated you.”

“Oh.” Elly looked up at him, then brought her leg over his pelvis and pushed herself up to straddle him. “Well then…” She took hold of him and lay his member along his abs, then lowered herself until her mound slipped open to caress the underside of his shaft, and began to grind along his length.

“I don’t mind being the girl you don’t bring home to meet the family.”

Elly woke up warm. It wasn’t the expected feather bed under her, but a hard, cozy, furry body. With a sleepy smile, her fingers slid through the expanse of fur. Her body was lulled by the feeling of Thorn breathing under her. One of his massive paws cradled her naked rear.

“Good morning!” Jillian came through the door, pushing a wheeled dining cart. Elly yelped and pulled the covers over herself. Her cry woke Thorn and he sat upright. Elly rolled off his chest and tangled up in the sheets.

“We can explain!” Elly said as she tugged at the bedding in an effort to both disentangle herself and escape.

“No need to explain anything, Elly. I’m just glad there’s no longer a need to sneak around.” Jillian placed two servings of breakfast on the oak table. “And it makes breakfast delivery a much shorter journey.”

“How long have you known?” Elly asked while Thorn got out of the bed, naked, and walked into the bathroom. Elly couldn’t resist watching him. His back wasn’t something she had seen often, his strong narrow tail with the ample tuft of black fur at the end, like a lion. The quills that sprout a diamond pattern up his neck and down his spine and across his shoulders.

“Weeks now,” Jillian said, not giving Thorn a second look. “To be honest, Jaques and I knew it would happen eventually as soon as we saw you.” She poured the tea for each of them.

Elly gathered the sheets around her body and stood up. She joined Jillian at the table and sat down. “We haven’t… not really.” She didn’t know why she was telling the maid this, she supposed it felt good to tell somebody. “I want to. But, he… we’re not…” she frowned and corrected herself. “*I‘m* not… built to… my body can’t…“ she chewed on her lip. “I’m afraid I can’t. Or I won’t be good at it.”

“Take your time, dear.” Jillian said. “No one is expecting anything of you. And a woman’s body is capable of feats that will astound you. Have a little faith in yourself. Build up to it.”

“I suppose…” Elly murmured.

“Are you enjoying your time with him?”

“Very much so.”

“And the prince seems satisfied?”

“I think so.” Elly felt the tight coating of dried seed keep the skin on her naked stomach taut under the blanket. It had been so warm and sticky and pleasant the night before, and the sound he made, the glazed look in his eyes…

“Then you have nothing to fear.”

“This little talk is just going to stay between us, right?” Elly asked.

“What little talk?” Jillian winked just as Thorn was exiting the bathroom. “I’ll come back to clear your plates in a little while. Please, enjoy your breakfast.”

Thorn sat across from Elly and they enjoyed their breakfast together. She was still bundled up in the sheets but it felt nice. It felt lackadaisical, and timeless. They had nowhere to be, nowhere to go, and nothing they needed to do. This was pure comfort.

They barely even spoke to one another during breakfast, and Elly basked in the comfortable silence, the quiet togetherness. Not to mention they worked up quite an appetite before bed.

It was around an hour before Jillian returned.

“Thank you, Jillian. Breakfast was amazing.” Elly helped the maid put the empty dishes on the cart. “Oh. Could you do me a favour?”

“Yes, Elly?”

“Next time you go into town, could you please pick me up a journal?”

Jillian grinned placidly. “I think I can manage that.”

Once they were alone, Elly headed for the bathroom. Thorn tilted his head and followed her. “A journal? Are you so bored?”

Elly turned to him, eyes wide. “Oh, no, far from it. I didn’t mean to offend–”

Thorn laughed. “I was teasing you.”

“Oh.” The tiny word trembled on Elly’s breath. Her cheeks turned pink. “In fact, I’m enjoying my life here so much that I want to keep a record of it. I want to remember everything.”

“Why not go into town yourself. Make a day of it?” Thorn took another step towards her. “You… know you’re not a prisoner here. You’re free to leave at any time.”

Elly turned away and knelt by the tub. She turned on the faucet and held her wrist under the falling water. “I feel like I’m living in a dream,” she admitted. “And I’m afraid that if I step one foot out of this mansion, I will wake up and find myself back at Fiona’s. And that thought terrifies me.”

Thorn ran his hand through her messy dark hair, down her back, and his claws drew pleasant tingles from her skin. Elly looked up at him and he cradled her cheek in his hand. “I promise you that this is all very real. You needn’t do anything you don’t want to. And I am not going anywhere.”

# TWENTY EIGHT

ONCE ELLY RECEIVED HER journal, the couple spent most of their afternoons in the library. Thorn would read books on history and Elly would write or draw or paint. It was a pleasant, freeing and easy life. The days and nights flowed together in a stream of endless placid contentment. Good food, excellent company, complete freedom, reading, writing, stories and sex. Elly had never before felt so completely at peace.

One journal became two, then three, then four. Each with a lovely leather-bound cover, rough-edged paper, and a little ribbon to mark the last entry.

The seasons changed and Elly wrote dreams she had the night before, or fantasies that drifted through her mind, images of the future, pretty leaves dried and pasted into the pages, or drawings and doodles.

"What's so funny?" Thorn asked.

Elly looked up from her journal, quizzically.

"You were giggling," Thorn told her.

“Oh. I was just writing about a silly memory of my father. He pronounced the word knife *ka-niff-y*, and I laughed like it was the funniest thing anyone had ever said. And that was how I learned how to spell the word *knife*.”

Thorn grinned, but did not return to the book he was reading. “Do you ever write about your mother?”

Elly shrugged. “I have no memories of her. She died giving birth to me. So it was just my father and I for nearly seven years until he married Fiona.” A sad smile graced her pink lips, the scars on her cheek distorted. “I was so happy when I had heard. A mother. Sisters. Things I never had before but secretly always wanted. They were immediately cold to me, which worried father but I lied and told him I liked being alone.”

As she spoke her smile faded. “After he died… things changed. He died because of me. And even though she didn’t say it outright, Fiona never let me forget it. To make ends meet, she turned my father’s property into the brothel, and she thrived. She became rich.”

Elly couldn’t stop the stream of consciousness that flowed out her mouth but Thorn just listened to all of it until she was spent.

“Your father allowed Fiona to turn his home into a brothel? You had no say?””Why would I? I was only a child when he died.””Was Fiona given the property in the will?” Thorn asked.

Elly frowned. “I don’t think there was a will.”

Thorn stood up. “Come with me.”

They walked to a part of the manor that Elly found unfamiliar. It was a study and it seemed rarely used. The air was musty and stagnant and the curtains drawn tight.

“All official documents that are signed by the crown have two copies. One for the crown, and one for the citizen who requires them. That way, if one is lost, there’s always a record.”

Thorn padded to one of the many cupboards that were built into the wall. The hinges squeaked as he opened the double doors.

“Bee… See…” he murmured. “Dee.” He browsed around a moment more then produced a leather case. He put it on the wide desk and opened it. “DeVerre.”

Elly looked at the papers within.

As if it would crumble into dust if she didn’t take enough care, Elly picked up the first document and read the words aloud.

“I, Edvard DeVerre, on this day, and of sound mind and body, do soforth bequeath, that in the event of my passing, all properties and possessions are transferred to my daughter, Elody Nicolette DeVerre.”

Her eyes drifted down to the signing date, which was after he had wed Fiona. The document bore the royal seal of the Thorn family and was signed by the king himself.

And by Edvard DeVerre. Her father.

Elly sat down in the leather office chair. A dry, cynical chuckle escaped her lungs. “It doesn’t even say I have to be eighteen before I am allowed to claim my inheritance. That land, my *home*, was mine the moment he passed on.”

“He was ensuring that you would be taken care of even if he was not around. Maybe he sensed Fiona’s nature,” Thorn suggested.

Hot tears came to Elly’s eyes. “That woman stole my birthright from under me and then tormented me for years.” She angrily wiped her eyes with the heel of her palm.

Thorn perused the other documents on the DeVerre family: Elly's birth certificate, Edvard and her mother's death certificates, the marriage licence between Edvard and Fiona. He slid a paper across the desk to Elly.

She blinked through her tears to read the paper.

It was the deed to the land.

A dark glint shone in Thorn's eye. "It occurs to me that, in the eyes of the Crown, since she doesn't own nor rent the property… Madame L'argent is in violation of the law."

# TWENTY NINE

AS THE CARRIAGE ROLLED through the gates of *Fiona's*, a sick bile rose up Elly's throat. Her hands rested on her lap, and were hidden under the man's cloak she had worn to the ball nearly a year ago. She couldn't hide her trembling from Thorn.

He put his large hand on her shoulder.

"I'm just cold," she said quietly. "That's all." But they both knew that was a lie.

The curtains on the carriage were closed so that no one may look in, and it was night so visibility was near impossible anyway. They had even forgone the royal coach in favour of a nondescript one used for when Jillian or Jaques went out into the town to run errands. Even if the coach didn't draw curiosity directly, the small coterie of guards ahead of them did.

Elly carefully peeled back the curtain a sliver so she could look out at the mansion. The rhythmic bump of the wheels on the cobblestones gave the impression the brothel was a giant, and it was lumbering toward her.

“I never wanted to come back here,” Elly said. “But I have to see this for myself.”

The captain of the town guards rapped on the door and the hostess for the night opened with a smile. Her joy immediately shifted to confusion when she saw the guards. They waited as the hostess disappeared inside the establishment. Moments later, Fiona came to the door and Elly’s blood went cold.

Thorn put his arm around Elly and held her. His warmth bled through her cloak and dress and leeched into her skin, was drunk up by her blood and spread through her body.

“What is the meaning of this?” Fiona demanded. She looked… unordered. Her hair was simply stuffed into a pretty hair net with some loose frizz haloing her temples. Her dress was not as puffed as she usually favoured and her jewels were lacking in marvel. She was feeling the pinch of Elly’s absence.

“By order of the crown prince,” began the captain of the guard, “Madame Fiona L’argent, you and your daughters have been found to be running an unauthorized business in a property you do not own.”

“It’s not too late to have her put in the stocks.” Thorn’s teeth brushed the shell of Elly’s ear. His husky, rumbling voice made her blood warm further. She pressed her legs together and shifted in her seat.

“If I were more like Fiona, I would have considered it.”

Elly watched, Thorn spread her thighs with his paws, and Fiona yelled that it was absurd.

The guard continued to read out the charges, Madeline and Adaline’s heads peeked out the door frame to watch what was going on. Thorn buried his head under Elly’s skirts.

Fiona's daughters asked where they were going to stay, the guard suggested a night in jail, where they would have food and shelter. Elly felt the warm breath against her hot sex, and she gasped in shock as the tip of Thorn's tongue touched her clitoris.

"Yes," she murmured to Thorn as a sign for him to continue. She nodded and Fiona turned dim in her vision as her eyes lidded halfway.

"I'm sure you can afford a few nights renting a room in the hunter's lodge," the guard said.

"The *hunter's lodge*?" To hear Fiona's reaction one would think they suggested she live in a ditch.

"It's the lodge or a cell," the guard said.

Elly grabbed Thorn's head and held it in place while his tongue slithered from one end of her sex to the other, dipping in and out of her opening teasingly. Her hot blood pulsed as the pleasure welled up inside. She wanted to look Thorn in the eyes but he was hidden under her many layers of skirt.

Fiona's shrill voice turned demure and pitiful, playing on the guard's sympathies. "What about my employees?" The pleasure Thorn brought cut through Fiona's faux empathy. The guards doubtless told her something about the ladies being able to stay until further notice; Thorn and Elly had discussed such issues. Only the three were to be evicted.

"Faster," Elly sighed the command out, and Thorn obeyed, his tongue lashing at her wildly. With a flick of his spine his tail thumped against the roof of the carriage. The driver, Jaques, took that as his signal to head back to the manor. The reins on the horses snapped and the carriage started moving.

The small dark world around Elly and Thorn rocked and bumped along the cobblestone path. She twisted her hips to grind against his tongue.

“I’m close,” she breathed. “I’m so close.”

Elly would probably never be able to identify what it was that compelled her to take one last look at Fiona and her daughters. She intended to merely peek beyond the drapery but her eyes met with Adaline’s.

Adaline’s face wrinkled into a confused puss. “Elody?” She grabbed Fiona’s arm and pointed at the carriage. “Mother, look!”

“Elody! In the carriage.” Madeline ran a few steps and the heat of fear rushed to Elly’s face. Fiona followed her daughters.

Madeline slipped and fell into a puddle that stretched across the road. Fiona tried to pull her up when Adaline ran into her mother and sent the both of them directly into the puddle as well. Their lush gowns were quickly soiled and weighed down by the sopping mud, sticky leaves and filthy water. In their tangled struggle, mud spattered their powdered cheeks and dulled their intricate ringlets.

Elly burst out laughing, which took the form of a powerful flex of her lungs and diaphragm. With her laughter, all her built up pleasure exploded from her body. A catastrophic, uncontrollable flood of mirth and stress and depression and humour and silliness and lust erupted forth. Elly didn’t dare hold back, she allowed herself to let go fully. She soaked Thorn’s face and mane and her petticoats and could only laugh as she unabashedly revelled in the most joyful, freeing orgasm she had ever experienced.

# THIRTY

ELLY HAD NEVER HAD this much fun in all her adult life. She and Faye were sitting on the terrace of a fancy cafe. Drinks with the girls was something she never thought she'd experience. The sun was soon to set and they were enjoying appetisers. Elly was wearing a fancy wide brimmed *chapeau* that was tilted to hide her scars. She felt so elite, so privileged.

She almost forgot that she had called Faye here for a reason.

"You want me to take over the brothel?" Faye gingerly placed her stemmed Sherri glass down. "It doesn't have to remain a brothel, you know. It can be anything."

"True." Elly speared an escargot onto her fork and ate it. The buttery, silky flesh was heavenly. "But, I'm not naive. I know the brothel is a cornerstone to the town's economy."

"Why not run it yourself? You know the ins and outs better than anyone. And it's the place you grew up in."

Elly offered a small, but sad smile. "I have too many bad memories of the place. They far outnumber the good ones. It's land, not a home."

Faye traced the rim of her glass with an elegantly manicured finger. She made the action seem much more sensual and suggestive than it truly was.

“I’m a travelling whore. You want me to retire?”

“If they want you, make them work for it,” Elly lightly punched the palm of her hand. “Make them come to you. Only then are they worthy.”

“Hm.” Faye visibly rolled the notion around in her mind. “I do like the thought of that. So, you would just *give me* the property?”

“You would pay taxes, obey the laws, just like everyone else, but I have the opportunity to do something good and I’m going to take advantage of that. I might never get a chance like this again. I can’t think of anyone better suited for the job. Perrault-Villeneuve needs you.” She reached across the table and put her hands on Faye’s. “I want you.”

Faye’s beautiful eyes fell half-lidded and she gave a keen nod. “I knew when I gave you those shoes you would walk right into the person you were meant to be. How is your beau, by the way?”

“I–” Elly blushed.

“Do not try to play games.” Faye gave Elly a tut-tut finger. “‘You’re smarter than most give you credit for but not quite as clever as you think you are.” She sipped her drink. “I smell him all over you. It’s a nice smell.”

Elly’s cheeks burned a deeper pink. she looked into her wine glass. “That’s actually another reason I invited you here. I…we…need your expertise.”

Faye’s manicured and painted eyebrows drew up and she folded her fingers together and rested her chin on the back of her hands. “You have my undivided attention.”

# THIRTY ONE

“OH, YOU *are* a big man,“ Faye purred once Thorn stepped into the light of the master bedroom of Thorn Manor. He was shirtless, but wore some leather pants Elly had made especially to accommodate his unique legs and tail.

“You’re not afraid?” Thorn asked.

“All the most interesting people have a beast inside,” Faye said. “That, in itself, is not fearsome. It’s when the beasts become monsters that one has to worry. Strip.”

Elly was already naked and waiting for Thorn to join her on the bed. Thorn looked at her, she smiled at him and gave a little nod and glanced at the lacing of his pants.

The two ladies watched as Thorn’s claws messed with the leather cord that fastened his pants closed. He undid the knot and pulled his pants off. His cock wasn’t even half-mast, he was nervous, but it did jump a little.

“Ohh, Elly,” Faye breathed. “What a lucky girl you’re going to be.” She looked up at Thorn’s face. “Please, join Elly on the bed, your grace.”

“Just Thorn, please.” He stalked over to the bed and sat next to Elly, who put her hand on his shoulder.

Faye looked the couple up and down. “Oh, this will be easy. Get him hard, I want to see exactly what you’re working with.”

Elly looked up at Thorn. “Is this alright with you?”

“I want this as much as you do. You can do anything to me you want.”

Elly smiled. “You, too.”

She held her hands out to him and his long tongue swiped against her palms, and left them wet and shining. She took hold of him with both hands and worked the length of his shaft, one hand occasionally cupping the head. It took mere seconds until he was fully erect.

“Lucky indeed,” Faye said as she admired Thorn’s gifts. “Now, as you both know, the human body is incredibly resilient. Elly, your body was made to grow, carry, and pass a newborn. And Thorn, you’re very impressive but you don’t quite measure up to that. So, with a little preparation, it should become easy for you two to fuck. Usually, the more aroused a lady’s body is, the more it opens up to receive entry. So, what sorts of things turn you on, Elly?”

“Pleasing Thorn. Receiving praise from him. Watching him work with glass.”

“Alright, well. Those are all good answers but…” Faye hesitated. “Do you two have any plans on… Being with other people?”

“No,” Thorn said, his quills rising a little.

“Never,” Elly said without a second thought.

Faye nodded. “I thought so, but I was just confirming. So, Elly, while your answers were good, and honest, they were also fully focused on Thorn. How *he* affects you. But how do *you* feel?”

“I don’t know,” Elly said in a small voice, afraid she was failing already.

“Before you met Thorn, what turned you on?”

Elly shook her head. “I don’t know, just… thinking about someone who would be interested in me. Who wanted me. That’s all.”

“That’s alright,” Faye said. Her white silk slip swayed and caught the light as she moved to the table where she placed her bag. From her bag she began to pull out thick, sturdy candles and place them on tables or on the floor in the corners of the room. One by one she lit them as she spoke. “We will figure this out together. Have you ever heard of sensation play?”

The couple shook their heads.

“It’s using different textures to elicit pleasurable sensations. Feathers, ice, rose petals…”

She regarded Elly. “I have a feeling you like soft things.”

Faye returned to her bag, and began to rummage through it. “Elly, lay back and close your eyes.”

Elly did as she was told.

“Thorn, take this and slowly run it along her body.”

There was a moment of nothingness and then something soft and light, a plume, touched Elly’s skin. The plume was soft with very fine filaments. Thorn used it along her inner thigh, slowly drawing it up from her knee to her pelvis. But never touched her sex. The light, silky tickle made Elly jump once and a while.

Over her hip, up her belly and across her navel. Over the right ribs, under a breast, then between them both. Up her throat then vaulting off her jaw. Shoulder. Collarbone. Circling a nipple, which caused Elly to whimper. Finally, over the nipple, which had grown hard minutes ago. Back down, the feather went, swiping and teasing in random intervals. Across some

scars. Down her other thigh, back up. Then along her pussy, drifting up, flat against her mound and nudging along her clit. Elly was aroused, she was wet, her mind was more than willing, but her body was still hesitant.

Thorn's tongue slid against her scarred breast and Elly's body jumped again. His front teeth tweaked her nipple, a sharp, luxuriant sting, contrasted so exquisitely by the feather roving up her ribs once more.

Elly whimpered his name, somewhat forgetting Faye was in the room. She couldn't help herself, and reached down to toy with the little bundle below. When her fingers reached the spot, she felt changed. Her labia was swollen and quivering, her clitoris was hard and already sparked at every little touch. And…Feeling experimental, Elly slid two fingers inside. The familiar tightness she was accustomed to was eased. The pressure inside her, the anxieties, they were subdued by Thorn's ministrations. Feeling equal parts curious and bold, she pushed in a third finger with a gasp. It was working! Still too small for Thorn to bury himself within but it was encouraging progress.

"Nicely done," Faye said, and Elly opened her eyes. From her bag, Faye produced a glass flask filled with liquid, and a tea tin. "This is a very, very slippery lubricant. It'll help." She put it on the bedside table. "Other things you can do, a body massage, cold and hot, different textures. Just continue to play with different sensations. With the lube, make sure to coat Thorn's penis completely, and yourself, as well, Elly. Inside, too. A few hours after you're finished, brew a cup of this tea and drink it while it is still warm, to keep from conceiving."

Elly sat up, a feat that took all her concentration. "Thank you, Faye."

Faye gathered her bag. "I think you can handle the rest on your own. I'll see myself out."

Thorn held the plume for her but Faye smiled with a cute wrinkle of her nose. “Keep it. I have more where that came from. Have fun you two.”

The lovers experimented with the limits of sensation for hours. Late afternoon became early evening, then dusk, then nightall. With the encroaching darkness, The room took on a golden glow, and smelled of warmth and sweat and the scent of arousal.

Elly was close, she could feel it. She just needed to get a little farther before her body could take him in. Her nerves were beginning to dull from the surprise of the plumes, of being etched by one of Thorn’s quills or his claws. The nip of his teeth and the brush of his fur and caress of his tongue still all felt wondrous but their effect had reached its peak.

She sat up, legs splayed and pussy dripping with arousal and Thorn’s saliva. “It’s not enough.” She ran her hand through his mane.

“Something else. I could get…” Thorn hesitated and looked out the closed window. “I could get leaves. Or, maybe cold water-” He turned back to her and she was holding a candle. The small flame flickered under the air expelled from his nostrils. “...Elly?”

“I… I want to try…” She couldn’t finish her sentence but she held the candle out for him.

“Are you sure?” He took it. The candle looked so small in his paw.

“Positive.” If she could withstand the fear and pain of the hot wax, then she could withstand anything.

On first instinct she thought she should close her eyes, but then decided she wanted the full experience. She watched with intent as Thorn tilted the

candle. The hot wax pooled in the shallow reservoir around the wick. The pool of liquid wax held in place a moment, then a thread-thin stream broke free, and dropped onto the skin of her belly. The sudden, poignant burn made her flinch.

"Is it too much?" Thorn sounded worried.

"No," Elly said. She couldn't say she liked it exactly, but she didn't want to stop. "Do it again."

Elly was transported to the time nearly a year ago when Fiona made her walk the pitch black halls of the brothel while holding a candle. It was the most frightening thing Elly had ever done. This was similar, but it was on her terms now.

More and more, small dots of hot wax landed on her naked pale skin. Each burned for a moment, and then cooled. The wax hardened into small buttons on her body that crumbled and flaked away.

Soon the pain gave way to anticipation, and surprise. Elly loved those feelings. She loved the way the golden candle light reflected in Thorn's eyes.

She gazed up at him, breathing deep, a drop of wax slowly sliding down the curve of her breast. Her hand caressed the side of his muzzle and sank into his mane. He had been so patient. So understanding and accommodating. He had seen to her every desire the best to his ability. He was truly a selfless prince.

She whispered, "I'm ready."

Thorn set the candle back in the holder and picked up the bottle of lube. Elly put her hands on his chest and sat up.

"Lay down," she told him. He rolled onto his back and Elly brought her leg over so she was straddling his muscular thighs.

Thorn removed the stopper with a slight squeak, then Elly took the bottle from him. She poured some of the liquid into her hand. It was crystal clear with a faint botanical smell. She rubbed it on herself, her slick fingers spreading open her folds to get everything as slippery as possible. She inserted two fingers inside, spearing them in and out, doing her best to coat her walls with the lubricant.

As she fingered herself, she poured a healthy stream of lube over Thorn's penis. The concoction made it glisten, the candlelight decorating the purplish-red organ with flourishes of melted gold.

She put the bottle aside and massaged his length. One hand was not enough, not really. But her other hand was occupied. Thorn took the bottle and poured some in his own hands, then took hold of himself. Together, they coated every inch of him, their hands sliding and co-mingleing.

Elly took her fingers out of her pussy and offered them for Thorn to sample her taste. He licked her fingers while she adjusted her position.

One of his large, long-fingered hands held her just above the hip to keep her steady while his other held himself firmly at the base. Elly rubbed herself on the head of his penis and looked into Thorn's eyes. She slowly lowered herself onto him, made her body take him inside.

Elly whimpered, it hurt, until Thorn ran his claws through her dark hair and said "good girl." A pulse thumped through her body, injecting a desire that was stronger than the pain.

Once the spaded head was in fully, Elly lifted and lowered herself onto it. Her inner walls massaged the exotic head, and the unique ridges that rested just below the head promised awaiting pleasure for Elly. With each little rise and fall of her body, Elly claimed more and more of Thorn.

Thorn's nostrils flared and his jaw flexed as he watched her take him. His oily hands grabbed her breasts and he squeezed them. He brought them to his mouth and his fangs and tusks and teeth raked and scratched while his tongue lashed at her nipples and flesh.

Elly didn't realise she had taken all of him until she was steadily riding him. She grabbed his horns and held his head to her chest as she worked herself against his member.

Thorn held her just as close, though he had to be so much more careful. One wrong move and he could destroy her. He continuously stroked her hair, his hands combing praise along her scalp.

Elly was panting, tiny little squeaks and whimpers escaped on the wind of her lungs as she couldn't stop her hips from coming down over and over again. He stretched her, rearranged her emptiness inside and filled it with himself; his presence. His warmth and power and strength. All the things Elly had gradually lost over the years as she was whittled down by cruelty. But now, Thorn was inside her, and all around her, holding her and making her feel safe and wanted and…

…And loved. Even if he never said the words. He didn't need to say them and she didn't need to hear them. The feeling was enough.Thorn bucked up from under her and she screamed in surprise and pleasure. Her hips worked harder, and her fingers dug into his fur until her nails found his skin. She felt electric and liquid and one with him. All her passion and ecstatic sensations were building up, faster and more powerful than she could ever remember experiencing.“Thorn,” she gasped. “I want us to come together. Please. I want to feel you come in me.”

Thorn growled some sort of noise that sounded like he was in agreement. He bucked again, Elly cried out again. She could feel the bruises on her

inner thighs taking colour, the thought of it was beautiful.

Thorn threw his head back and howled, the most virile, powerful sight Elly had ever seen. Her ears took in his howl and his hot seed shot into her. It was like his load forced her orgasm out, to make room for all the substance of him that poured into her. She lost all control of her body, no longer cognizant of her arms or legs or any part of her. She was pure rapturous sensation. Nothing else was real or present. Only her, her ecstasy, and Thorn.

He pulled out, and an overflow of cum slid onto the sheets. He rested his massive cock on her tummy and another lazy serving of his seed rolled out onto her flat stomach.

Elly's entire body was still thrumming, but this time it felt like a need, a hunger. She rolled onto her tummy and reached down to take him in her hand. "More," she gasped. She was tired, buzzing, but starving for him. "Please." She lifted her hips, offering herself to him. His cum slipped from her pulsing pussy and down her thighs.

Thorn put his palms on her ass, his claws pricking at her skin. He lifted and spread her, commanding access. Slowly, but in one fluid, unhalting motion, he entered her again, and was rewarded with a loud moan of longing.

Elly pushed her hips against him, and gripped the bed sheets hard while Thorn pressed his hands into the mattress and bucked into her. His big, strong body was poised over her like a crescent moon while she lay prone on her stomach.With every thrust into her, Thorn panted, and Elly lifted her hips to accept him and tease out more pleasure for them both. Within the span of a few bucking hips, Elly had caught her second wind and moved

with him, her ass coming to meet Thorn's pelvis with each of his forward thrusts.

His clawed hands held her around the hips, and she was planted to the mattress. He moved in the same pattern over and over, his saliva dripping from his slightly opened maw and landing just in front of her eyes. He had let the beast take over and Elly wouldn't have it any other way. She wanted him, all of him, even the beast.

He took a firmer grasp of her hips and pulled. Her legs dangled off the bed, her toes finding purchase on the throw rug. With a loud moan she pushed up and arched her back. He grabbed her hair with one hand, wrenching her back further, his other hand squeezing her left breast tight while the other bounced and jiggled with each thrust.

Elly lost track of how many orgasms that washed over her. Four? Five? Or just three, which rolled through her over and over again like a tide. Just as she started to come down off the high of one, another surge of pleasure crashed into her and flooded her senses.

Thorn pulled Elly onto his chest and she lay along his body. His chest rose and fell in a comfortable steady rhythm with the pace of his breathing. It slowed and evened out. Asleep.

Elly tipped her head up to see his face. His nose twitched deftly with each breath, his eyes were closed, the black seams where his eyelids met didn't even flutter. So exhausted and satisfied he didn't even have need for dreaming.

"I love you."

Elly's confession was made in the smallest possible voice she could manage, just above a whisper. She lowered her head and snuggled back into

his chest. She was exhausted, and her body ached with contentment, yet she still craved so much more.

As her mind was drifting on welcoming, black waves of sleep, Elly thought she heard a low growling whisper.

“I love you, too.”

# THIRTY TWO

FROM THEN ON, THE weeks were much like the weeks had been before Elly and Thorn were able to fully consummate their relationship, but now they spent more time indulging in marathon bedding sessions. Each night before sleep, Elly would willingly, excitedly, offer herself for Thorn's pleasure. Each night, he went a little harder, a little more savage, until she was reduced to a murmuring vessel who could do nothing but say, "please don't stop."

He would tell her to remain absolutely still as his strong hands held her in place while he filled her with every inch of him, over and over. And she knew that if she did as she was told, he would praise her and that alone felt so much better than any moan could.

The days and nights went on. *Fiona's* became *The Sapphire Desire* and come it's grand reopening, saw far more business than it ever had under Madame L'argent's ownership. It became a place that girls *wanted* to work, that people came from all over just for a thirty minute show. Faye had

transformed it into a blazing jewel, the heartbeat in the centre of Perrault-Villeneuve.

Every morning her crow friends would come to the window for their breakfast. Now, they came with fledglings. Small, sleek but somehow slightly disheveled adolescents that did nothing but pester their parents and scream for food.

Elly, and everything around her was thriving.

Then, came the morning everything changed.

“Elly. Elly, wake up.”

A familiar but nearly impossible to place voice.

Warm, dry lips placing a kiss on her unscarred temple.

Elly stirred and opened her eyes. She was in the bed she shared with Thorn, the canopy curtains open but the massive master bedroom was still dark as night.

Her body still hummed with the aftermath of her and Thorn’s shared passion, so her mind was hazy. She rubbed her eyes and stared at the figured that loomed over her, half-lit by candlelight. She gasped and pulled the sheets up to cover her breasts, her other hand desperately trying to flatten the sex out of her hair.

“Prince Ashton!”

He laughed, and Elly blinked. There was no need to be modest, Ashton and Thorn were one in the same. Just a different outward appearance. She dropped the sheet, and cupped his chin with that hand.

“Is this a dream?” Elly asked. “Or, maybe, has the curse lifted?”

He cradled her unblemished cheek in his palm, and drew her into a kiss, which she accepted fully.

He leaned her back into the pillows and was inside her in seconds. The ease in which she could wrap her arms around his shoulders or legs around his strong hips, the comfort of it, the way the heel of her foot could press into the cheek of his ass. She looked up at him and he down at her as they moved as one. But she lacked things to grasp on to. No horns, no massive mane. There was no large weight threatening to crush the air out of her, or claws that just barely missed slicing into her flesh.

But it was still Ashton Thorn, the man she had wanted in the garden, under the fireworks, who ventured under her skirts and danced his tongue along her nethers.

She pulled him into a kiss, his tongue nimble against hers. Doubtless he had years of experience kissing women, and this particular one took her breath away. She rocked her hips in time with the prince's movements, then rolled so she was on top. She sat up, and rode him as she knew the ladies in the brothel to do. She braced her hands on his chest and moved above Ashton while his hands took her breasts. His hands were still strong, but didn't have nearly the strength or size as before. The flesh of them was too much for him to hold at one time but still he massaged and teased them as they bounced against his palms.

Elly tightened her muscles within, coaxing out the pleasures of a well-endowed human man inside her. Though he hadn't been in possession of his beastial size, the sensations were still extremely potent. Now, without the fur, Elly could feel the slick sweat on his hot skin, the ripple of his tight muscles, the gutters of his abs and the ditches on his hips that point like an arrow down, down, to his cock which was disappeared within her. She

could see his skin go from tan to red with lust, how his nipples were hard, she didn't know a man's nipples could get hard, and the ways in which the corners of his eyes creased as he concentrated on his staying power.

Ashton grabbed her shoulders and lifted her off, before tossing her to land on her stomach on the bed. Elly looked over her shoulder at him.

"Up," the prince ordered, and Elly put her ass in the air for him with a giggle.

His tongue assaulted her throbbing slit first, soon joined by two obstinate fingers that explored within. She panted as his fingers parted and came back together, as his wrist twisted his hand to mix her up inside.

"Ashton," Elly whimpered. "I want you."

Ashton paused his licking long enough to say, "I want you, as well, Elly," which earned a long moan from her. He grabbed her hair and pulled her back, and that transformed her moan into something like a laugh and a yelp. To both taunt and tantalise her prince, Elly shook her ass.

Behind her, Prince Ashton readjusted his stance, and removed his fingers. He pushed inside again and bucked his hips, tugging at her hair like it were riding reigns. She slammed her ass into his hips, following her ruler's desires.

Silky heat burst into her as Ashton came, his seed splashing inside Elly. It made tears spring to her eyes. Part of Ashton, be he man or beast, was inside her now, for the rest of her life. She twisted her hips to face him and pull him into a kiss. He dropped on top of her, pressing her into the bed. She rolled, found her way on top of him and kissed him again with his come siding out of her body.

They breathed heavily together, almost as one, their lungs synchronized to the beating of each other's heart. Laying on his chest, Elly didn't know

which heartbeat was his and which was her own, both slammed through her ribcage.

Ashton, human, man, and whole, looked at her. “Elly, I–”

She silenced him with a kiss, and took him inside again, riding the strength back into her prince until he could once again overpower her.

Through all the frenzied, hurried pleasure, there was a reassuring familiarity, a constant. She felt it, inside, outside, in the sounds and smells and the way he touched her. This was still the creature she had been making love to nightly, all that changed was the form.

Though, she did miss the swat of his tail.

Night was giving way to dawn when Elly and Ashton had finally exhausted themselves. The room was surrendering to pale blue light. All Elly noticed was the golden twinkle of candle flame reflected in Ashton’s eyes. His fingers traced the scars on her cheek.

“You’re so beautiful, Elly,” he said. Tears came to her eyes and she worked hard to blink them away before he noticed them.

Ashton sat up, and took Elly’s hand in his. He got out of the bed and sat Elly up.

“Stay right there.”

Elly sat up, and watched Ashton in his complete nakedness as he walked around the bedroom. He was perfect, not an inch of fat. Everything from his arms to his calves was made up of strong tight muscles that flexed and rippled with every movement. And this God of a man thought *she* was beautiful?

He went to her easel, one of many that had taken up residence in the manor, and collected some brushes and a pot of black paint. He returned to the bed. He dipped a brush into the pot of stark black paint, and took her

left hand. He drew the paintbrush along her scars, tracing the garnish, twisted things in black. Almost as if in a meditation, Ashton outlined her scars until they started to resemble roots, or maybe vines. The vines sprouted from her fingers and palm, and coiled up her arm, down her ribs, hung under her left breast, her nipple almost taking up the role of a closed rosebud. They crawled up her neck, and reached along her cheek.

The black roots Ashton planted with his paintbrush sprouted thin, hooked, sharp spines, braided and chained and interlocking. He painted each, one by one, transforming her scars into a brier of formidable black thorns.

As she watched Ashton meticulously rework the landscape of her scars, a heavy feeling grew in Elly's stomach. In a way she couldn't fully grasp, this felt like some form of a farewell. He blew on the paint to encourage it to dry.

She forced a smile onto her face. "If only we could spend the rest of the day just like this," she said, teasing out a preferable alternative that would kill the heavy feeling now moving from her gut to her chest.

Ashton put the paintbrush back in the pot, finished with his work. "You have no idea how tempting that is. But I must get ready for the evening's ball."

The ball?

The *ball?*

Had it been a year already?

A cold numbness came over Elly. She closed her eyes and, for a moment, she was back in her cellar, warding off wakefulness. *No. I don't want to.* "I didn't realise that was tonight."

“Jillian has a gown waiting for you in your old room. She assures me it’s beautiful.” Ashton got out of the bed and walked to the bathroom.

Elly drifted out of the bed, but not on clouds of happiness. Instead she was lost among waves, with no control, at their mercy, and forced to go with the motions. Her body moved automatically, and she draped her dressing robe over her naked body. Then, her feet shuffled her to her old room.

# THIRTY THREE

A DRESS FORM STOOD in the centre of the room. An uninvited guest. An invader. It wore what was indeed a beautiful gown. Yellow, no, gold. With a dramatically tiered skirt over a bounty of tulle, a sweetheart neckline and off the shoulder sleeves. A pair of matching golden opera gloves hung around the dressform's neck.

She avoided the dress, and walked with heavy feet into the bathroom. She filled the tub with hot water and perfumed oil and soaked for a long, long time.

She was careful not to get her thorns wet, and hung her arm outside the tub but the ink-like paint was extremely durable and did not wash away so easily. Reasonably confident the artistry wouldn't dissolve in the water, Elly scrubbed any filth or stench from her body.

Elly could smell him in her dark hair. She thought about the sensation when he ran his fingers through her locks, or grabbed it all in one hand and pulled. Would he ever do that to her again?

She curled her hand into a fist, and Thorn's words echoed in her mind. He had forbade her from slandering herself, of insulting herself, and while he had been horrified when he saw her punch herself, he didn't strictly forbid it.

But Elly couldn't lie to herself. She knew the spirit of his command carried over to her tendency to self-harm, and she dropped her fist into the water.

As the bath cooled, so did the comfort it brought, so she got out, braided her wet hair, and dressed in one of her more simple afternoon frocks. After she was dressed, she looked over at the gown, still standing in the centre of the room like a lady in waiting.

"So…" Elly walked a slow circle around the exquisite thing, her gaze taking in every inch of it. It looked like it would fit like a glove. Tailor made for her. "This is what I'm to wear while I watch the man I love dance with half a hundred ladies until he finds the special one to break the spell." Bile rose in her throat, pressure ballooned in her skull.

Elly wasn't a fool, she knew Ashton Thorn loved her. It was just that the desire to be human was stronger than the desire to spend his life with her. And she couldn't blame him in the least. Unlike Elly, Ashton deserved a perfect, beautiful, flawless life, without a single scar or blemish.

Though that did nothing to quell the anguish inside her. She grabbed her sewing shears and drove the blades into the heart of the dressform. She pulled them out and the metal squeaked against the wood. Another stab, into the rounded breast, and she broke the supporting cups in the bodice. She stabbed again and shattered the boning, and opened a large gouge in the stomach, the satin splitting apart. She dropped to her knees, opened the

scissors, and hacked at the tulle until it was tattered ribbons under deflated satin.

Elly didn't feel any relief. She stood up and the shears fell from her hand and landed on the floor with a metallic clatter. She slid her feet into a pair of slippers, and left the room.

Elly had no desire to leave the manor, nor to leave the prince at all. She just needed to get out for a while, breathe some fresh air, clear her thoughts. Or perhaps wallow in them.

She sat in the gazebo and knew it as the first place where she felt sheltered in the storm, with a huge monster curled up next to her. Back then, she didn't know it was Ashton, but she knew she was safe.

She looked down at her painted scars and swore she could still feel the warmth of his fingers on her skin as he held her arm in place.

Thorn…

His namesake. Something Elly had no right to.

What would become of her when he found his bride? His princess? His… queen. In a way, it was funny. She never had desires to be queen, or royalty of any sort. She only wanted to be with him, be he man or beast. Perhaps by that logic, she could tolerate the role of mistress. Concubine. Royals constantly took lovers behind closed doors, it wasn't a secret, not really. Let whatever woman he chose tonight break the curse, rule at his side and carry his babies. When the weight of the crown and role of husband and father became too burdensome, let Ashton come to Elly's bed and fuck her senseless.

She brushed tears from her eyes and nodded. She could live with that. What she could not abide, however, was forgoing one final drink with him. One final dance with him.

The sun was falling west, and soon it would be evening. She had to hurry and change. Guests would be arriving and Elly could not bear the humility should any of them catch sight of her.

Elly made it back to her room with no one noticing, luck smiling down on her. She shut and locked her door but almost tripped over her own feet when she saw the golden ball gown. She took a few shambling steps toward it before she again fell to her knees before it. She knelt in a cloud of ruined yellow tulle and satin.

“What have I done?” She whispered. “I…I don’t even remember it being this bad…”

Such a beautiful, refined dress, and she ruined it in her jealousy.

Elly’s breath was coming in quick, short bursts, too fast and too brief. She was light headed and her vision was dim. She balled her fist.

“Mm-mm,” Elly shook her head no and instead of punching her chest, she wiped her nose on the back of her hand. “Mmn…” she forced herself to her feet and grabbed her sewing supplies. “No. No, I can fix this. I can fix it, I have to fix it.”

She dropped her sewing gear on the floor by the dress then stumbled to her wardrobe and threw open the doors. She didn’t have much time to browse so picked a black satin evening dress and pulled it from the hanger. She brought it over to the mess of gold and tore through the black panelling and underskirts. When the black dress was just a shell, she lifted it over the bust form and pulled it down over the gold dress. She stood back and looked at her work.

The black skirt was too tight to hold all the gold tulle, shredded though it was. She split the black skirt open and tore out the front panelling to expose the tattered gold tulle. Elly tilted her head. She was somewhat taken by the ramshackle effect.

She dove under the dress and sewed some of the torn yellow and golden tulle back into the underskirt to fill it out.

She wound the black tulle around the bodice and edged the neckline with it, one strap going over her right shoulder.

Elly took another critical eye to the gown, tested it for structural integrity, then removed it from the dressform. She slid into it from below, swimming through waves of gold and yellow until she broke through to the bodice. She tightened the laces at the back with her own hands and let the one shoulder strap fall limp and halfway down her upper arm.

She undid her braid and let her hair fall free, wavy and wild, something proper ladies simply didn't do when attending a fancy ball. She slipped on the black shoes Faye had given her a year ago, and as a final touch, went to her jewelry box and opened the lid.

There was only one item inside, the royal wax seal pendant she had made. She took it out and tied the black ribbon around her throat.

She almost checked the clock, then decided she didn't want to know.

Catching sight of herself in the full length mirror, Elly's breath hitched. So, this was what she was going to wear on the last night of her perfect life. When she came to the manor a year ago, her dress had been unique, and personal. This, though…

"Now *this* looks like fire."

For once, Elly turned and favoured her left side. The painted thorns made her look confident and strong. She imagined the thorns creeping up her

spine and she stood a little straighter, a little taller.

She took a breath and fiddled with the pendant at her throat. Time for one last moment of warmth before everything around her turned to ash.

# THIRTY FOUR

ELLY ENTERED THE BALLROOM and expected herself to get lost among the swirls of fabrics and jewels.

She didn't.

Instead, she felt a knowing tug on her heart. She knew that trapped in a cloud of women clad in finery was Prince Ashton Thorn. He had admirers; women who were falling over themselves to be his queen, or at the very least, mistress. Or at the very, *very* least, bed warmer for the night.

Or library blowjob.

She stationed herself at a sweets table and watched the crowd at a distance.

"But mother we're starving."

Elly recognized that whine. She tilted her head slightly and saw Fiona and her daughters. Of course they would be here. It was their right. Every year, every eligible maiden was invited to this ball, and with them no longer in possession of the brothel, it was no surprise they would try to weasel their way into these walls tonight to marry their way back into wealth.

She studied Fiona and her daughters. They were wearing the same dresses they had worn last year and all three women looked smaller somehow. The necklines of their dresses were not fully filled out. The girls had shadows on their cheeks and under their eyes.

“Enough whimpering!” Fiona snapped. “You can eat once one of you marries the prince, and then we will no longer be forced to live in that lodge.”

Elly tried not to smile. She failed.

Elly circled the fortress of gowns like a shark, her gaze penetrating through until she locked eyes with Ashton. He was dressed in a blue waistcoat with a pair of tails that went down to his calves and met the rise of his shining black boots. His vest was black velvet over a white blouse. His strong legs sported cream trousers with crisp creases. He looked impossibly handsome. His own expression transformed from polite evasiveness to awe when he saw her.

“Prince Ashton,” Elly said. All the ladies turned and looked at her. “A drink?”

“A drink sounds terrific.” Ashton escaped the ladies and joined Elly. The two of them walked to the bar.

“Well, this seems familiar,” Ashton said.

“Two fairy fires,” Elly told the bartender.

“You look…” Ashton’s stare roamed up and down her body. “Transformed.”

“It’s like Faye said, everyone has a beast inside them.” She smiled, then turned her attention to the bartender as he lit the sugar cubes. She wasn’t afraid this time.

“I was beginning to think that you weren’t going to come,” Ashton said.

Elly looked away from the burning sugar and up at him. “Even if I am not the one who breaks your curse, I just want to be in your life. Whatever that looks like.”

They ran their drinks under the tap and stirred them.

“A toast?” Ashton asked.

Elly nodded and lifted her glass. She imagined throwing him onto the bar and mounting him in front of all these people. Riding him, claiming him.

“To… the beasts within,” Ashton said.

When their glasses touched, Elly felt the resonance of it within her bones.

Their drinks were gone in seconds, both somewhat aware this was a sort of flirtatious game, but also achingly delicate.

Ashton stood and offered his hand. “May I request a dance?”

“Always.” Elly took his hand and he led her to the dancefloor.

The crowd parted for them, not only because he was the prince, but also they were in awe of Elly. She didn’t know if it was due to her unusual dress, or her painted-over scars, or simply because she had been incognito for an entire year and probably thought dead. Whatever the reason, the guests formed a circle along the edge of the dance floor and Ashton swept Elly across the floor that was polished to a mirror shine.

He put his hand on her waist and she put a hand on his shoulder. The band played a melody that filled the chamber, drowning out curious gossip and comments.

“You look…” Ashton began. “I can’t even find the words to describe how striking you are tonight.”

“Thank you,” Elly smiled up at him. “But, please, my prince, the last thing I want to talk about is myself.”

“I’ll try my best,” the prince said. “But it might be impossible.”

“If there is one thing I have learned this past year, it’s that nothing is impossible.”

With a flourish, Ashton spun Elly out. Her skirts whirled around, a hurricane of black and gold flame. She came back to him and placed a hand on his chest.

“You’re showing me off,” she said.

“You’re enjoying it,” Ashton replied.

Elly couldn’t hide her grin. He had come to know her so well. No one ever knew her as completely as Prince Ashton Thorn had.

“I am, I admit it.”

Ashton coiled a length of Elly’s dark hair around his finger. He gave a discreet tug and she shivered in his arms.

“Good girl,” he whispered. His lips were so close to hers that they could have kissed.

“But tonight is about you. And finding your queen.”

He gazed into her eyes. Intense ocean blue that Elly could have sunken into, drown in, and it would be a sweet death.

Ashton said, “I’ve already found her.”

Though her heart plummeted into her stomach, inside, she told herself she knew this was coming. What she didn’t anticipate was that it would hurt worse than any fire could.

Elly forced a smile. “Seems I took so long getting ready I missed all the excitement. Why aren’t you dancing with her?”

He cocked his head and considered her. Beastly mannerisms were a part of him at this point. “I am.”

Elly’s hands left his shoulders and slid down to his chest, her palms trailing out silky whispers against the fabric. “Ashton, we already said–”

“I love you.”

Her protests withered on her tongue and her eyes filled with tears.

“I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want you to be my queen.”

Elly drew in a ragged breath. “I want to spend my life with you, too. But we already know I can’t break the curse.”

“Is my humanity that important to you?”

Elly blinked. “It’s important to you. I want you to be happy. It makes no difference to me, I love all of you.”

Ashton cradled her scarred cheek in his palm. “You’re what’s important to me.”

There, on the dancefloor of the royal ballroom in the royal manor, in the capital city of the land of Alaeotis, Ashton kissed her, in full view of every guest who cared to look.

The kiss was tender, and loving, with just the hint of possessiveness. It made Elly feel as if she had found home.

Time stopped.

Ashton pulled back, breaking the kiss. “I want to make it official.”

Time resumed. Elly nodded.

Ashton smiled wider than Elly had ever seen him and he turned to face the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, it is my absolute pleasure and honour to present to you all, my bride. Mademoiselle Elody Nicolette DeVerre.”

The dance hall clamoured with the sound of polite applause. Elly faced the guests and curtsied.

“Do you wish to address your people?” Ashton asked her.

Her people. These were to be her people. She was to rule over them…

Elly opened her mouth and took in a breath.

A crystal drinking glass sailed in an arc, and struck Elly. Glass and red wine exploded all over the bodice of her dress and splashed down to turn the gold and yellow crimson.

“*Her*?“ Madeline screeched. “You choose *her*?!”

“Why *her?*“ Adaline groaned. She pitched a creme puff in Elly’s direction and it landed in her dark hair. It oozed cream and slowly rolled through her long hair, leaving a sticky tangle of caramel.

“What’s so great about her?” Madeline grabbed a small strawberry shortcake. It squished between her fingers. She threw it at Elly but Ashton put himself between Elly and the weaponized baked treat. It splat against his green and blue cape.

“Guards.” Ashton snapped his fingers. “Detain those women.”

As commanded, the royal guards marched toward Madeline and Adaline. Fiona screeched for the guards not to touch her girls. Elly’s ears were ringing.

Ashton doubled over with a groan.

Elly tried to catch him but fumbled so she fell on her knees at his side. “Ashton? What-?” Did someone hurt him? Did someone try to stab him? Elly ran her hand along his back and felt, beneath the cape a small garden of sharp blades sprouting on his shoulders. She looked at his face, and his bottom jaw had jutted out to make room for his fangs. His hair was growing too fast, coming free of its ribbon and falling down his cheeks.

The ringing Elly had heard wasn’t in her mind, it was the strike of midnight. A wave of overwhelming guilt crashed over her. She should have never taken so long fixing her stupid dress. She should have checked the time when she had the thought. This was all her fault for making him wait.

His digitigrade legs tore his pants and his paws burst from his boots. His long fingers ripped through his gloves, fingernails lengthening into claws. His tail lashed at the polished dance floor like a whip. Cracking bone filled the air as his two pairs of horns burst through his skull. His face rearranged itself into the familiar wolfen maw.

Then, chaos.

Women were screaming, and people were running. The guards were at a loss for what to do. Some half-drew their swords while they advanced toward Thorn and Elly while others tried to maintain order and usher guests in a calm fashion out of the manor. Some stood in stunned awe and terror at the truth of the prince.

During all this, Thorn, weak from his transformation, pushed himself to his feet and stood slouching. Even still, he towered over the guardsmen. He growled, drool sliding between his teeth as he struggled to absorb the pain.

With a snap, one of the newer guards let loose a crossbow bolt. It soared through the air and bounced off his right spiralled horn, carving a deep gash into it. He threw his head back and roared.

“No!” Elly came to Thorn’s defence. She grabbed the first weapon in reach, which was a five foot tall candelabra. On the end were three burning candles. She held it out toward the guards, the small flames stretching into angry ribbons in warning.

Someone threw a bottle and Elly managed to bat it away with her trident of iron and fire. It smashed into another candle holder and the liquid spirits caught ablaze. Elly barely noticed and did not care. Staring at the regiment of guards through the candle light, she stepped towards them, jabbing her weapon in their direction.

Pandemonium was all around. It's almost amusing how quickly people tend to fall apart when met with a reality that doesn't match their idealized life. They were no longer proper, no longer above it all. The guests were screaming, pushing each other out of the way, running here and there. Some had their arms full of the royal silverware or fine china or silk window dressings.

The fire spread across the room and blocked the only door in or out of the ball room.

In unison, the guards raised their crossbows towards Elly and Thorn.

This was the end. Elly knew she wanted to spend the rest of her life with Prince Ashton Thorn, and if this was how, then so be it.

Everything stopped. The chaotic guests, the terrified guards, even the fire stopped waving and spitting.

"That's quite enough of all this." From between two of the guards, Faye LaFey sauntered toward Elly and Thorn. "Everyone must calm themselves," she said in a level, firm, yet sultry tone. She turned and addressed the guards and the socialites. "This beast you see before you is indeed our prince, Ashton Thorn." Faye smiled. "You see, when he was born, Prince Ashton was cursed by a wicked fae that, upon meeting the love of his life, he would turn into a ferocious looking beast. I assure you all, he is still the same kind, generous prince that we all know." Faye frowned at the guests, many of whom had arms loaded with expensive crystal and silver. "You should be ashamed, acting so greedy and jumping to conclusions. For years, the prince throws us all a lavish party and this is how you repay him? Put it back. Everything. All of you."

Faye tisked and wiggled her finger at the crowd. The guest's faces grew slack and they dully listened as if in a trance. While the fires blew out, the

guests put their stolen goods back. “Now, everyone, go home, and think not of the horror of this night, but of the open heart of your prince, despite his outward appearance.

The guards lowered their arms. “Forgive us, your highness,” said the captain. He dropped to a knee, and bowed. The rest of the guards followed suit, taking a knee and bowing in respect and obedience.

“It is… understandable,” Thorn said. “Now, excuse me while I retire to my room with my love.” Thorn picked up Elly as if she were a proper bride.

“Now cheer for your king, your new queen, and how lucky you are to be citizens of this blessed land,” Elly heard Faye joyously call out as the doors closed behind them. A cheer rocked the walls as Thorn carried her towards their bedroom.

# THIRTY FIVE

ELLY FEARED NEVER AGAIN being held in Thorn's arms, or carried to bed. Now that those fears had been assuaged, she revelled in the feeling. She reached up and ran her finger over the fresh knick in his horn.

"Does it hurt?"

Thorn smiled down at her. "Not even a little."

Elly squeezed her thighs together in anticipation of thoroughly pleasuring her prince tonight. "I like it. It makes you look tough. Rugged."

Thorn nudged open the bedroom door with his paw.

"Well," Faye was stretched out on the huge bed. "I think they took what I said to heart. Congratulations, my friends."

"What are you doing up here?" Elly asked. "How did you get here so fast?"

Thorn stammered and put Elly down. "Would you care for a drink?"

"I can't stay." Faye stood from the bed. "I'm just here to offer you one final gift."

Elly watched her friend move through the room. Shimmering pale blue wings flit on Faye's back. Had her ears always been so pointed?

"What I told your people was… a fib," Faye admitted. "The truth of it is, that before Prince Ashton was born, his mother and my cousin, a powerful fae named Morrigan, were the best of friends. Something came between them and it broke Morrigan's heart. In revenge she cursed you to spite your mother." Faye sighed.

"I was cursed to be a beast except for one night a year for the rest of my life?" Thorn asked.

"Unless you found your true love by your 21st birthday," Faye confirmed.

Thorn's eyes widened. "But when I was twenty-one, Elly was only a child!"

"Such is the cruel genius of Morrigan." Faye lamented.

"Wait," Elly's voice shook. She found it nearly impossible to breathe. "Are we only in love because of magic?" The tears that came to her eyes made her furious. "If Ashton was never cursed, would he even have looked at me?"

Faye offered a smile. "The love you two share comes from something more powerful than even fae magic. It's chemical. Biological. Natural. Morrigan merely put a time constraint on Ashton's humanity."

"Truly?" Elly asked.

"I swear on my eternal immortality as a fae," Faye answered. "Now, as for my gift. I don't believe in punishing the child for the sins of the parent. I'm here to undo what damage I can. But, I am not as powerful as Morrigan is, so the best I can do is offer you both a choice."

Elly took Thorn's beastial hand in both of her own. "We're listening."

Faye's wings flit and she hovered off the ground. With a wave of her hand a swirling wall of blue materialised before Thorn and Elly. In it stood two figures.

"In one world, you live together as two beautiful royal humans. All curses and scars go away."

In the ethereal looking glass stood King Ashton and Queen Elody. Elly marveled at her clear, smooth skin and bright eyes. Somehow Ashton looked even more dashing than ever. A little boy and little girl played at their feet.

The scene changed to a dark one, a funeral procession.

"But, within King Ashton Thorn beats the heart of a beast. His human body cannot contain it and in ten years from this day, the king will die. The kingdom will mourn. And from there, the Queen's future has yet to be written. She may follow soon in death, or find a new love, raise the princes and princesses who's kings blood flow through their veins. It's a future of possibilities."

The magic looking-glass turned clear and empty once more. Elly blinked back tears and squeezed Thorn's hand tighter. The magic mirror reflected them as they were now, except the paint had long faded from Elly's scars. Faye began to speak again.

"In another world, you two live as you are now, scars and all. Prince Ashton Thorn will never again be human. He will assume this beast form for as long as he is breathing. However, you will never age. You will quietly rule the kingdom together forever."

Thorn was the first to speak. "I want Elly to have everything she's ever want–"

“Beast!” Elly said. “We choose the beast. We choose the scars.” Elly looked up at Thorn and ran her fingers through his mane. “You saw past my scars. And I saw through your beastial form. And we both found love. We were always meant to be together, and I can’t imagine living a life without. Nor would I want to. I want you, but only if it’s forever.”

Thorn stared down at her, and for a moment, Elly feared he would deny her. Instead, he took her by the waist in both hands and picked her up. Elly kissed him, grabbing onto his quills and wrapped her legs tight around his chest.

The room began to spin and blue light swirled all around them. Elly felt weightless, but safe in his arms. She could barely hear Faye when she spoke.

“And they lived happily ever after.”

# EPILOGUE

ELLY SIPPED HER ABSINTHE and leaned over the balcony railing. The screams coming from the town square were so loud she could hear them all the way from the manor. She held up the pair of small binoculars and looked at the fountain at the square.

“The prince is a beast!” Fiona screamed. “An actual beast! Why isn’t anybody troubled by this?”

Fiona and her daughters, now branded the L’argent Loons, had been screaming about this for days now. While Elly never tired of it, it was disruptive to day to day life in Perrault-Villeneuve and so something had to be done.

Elly gasped then groaned as, behind her, Thorn’s shaft rubbed between her thighs and slid against her dripping sex. She tried to steady her hand and look through the binoculars again. She watched the white carriage pulled by the two pale horses wheel up to the fountain. On the side of the wagon read Stoker Sanitarium in red letters. Four doctors in white spilled out and approached Fiona and the girls.

“A beast! A beast!” Screamed Fiona. “A blasted beast! He must be killed! He is a danger to us all! He will eat us! He will eat us!”

“Mother! Mother, please!” The girls were harder to hear, their voices didn’t carry as far. “Mother why are they taking us? Where are we going? Mother please, don’t let them take us away!”

“A beast!” Fiona made such a scene. She kicked and scratched and bit. It took all four doctors to get her into the carriage. They locked the doors from the outside, then rolled off to the asylum. Life continued on.

Elly lowered the binoculars. “I should feel bad.”

Thorn nipped her ear. “Do you?”

“No.” Elly reached down with her hand and guided Thorn into her. Her body accepted him without hesitation, moulding and shaping to touch all of him as he pressed within.

He grabbed her hair and pulled, wrenching her back into his chest. He took her scarred breast in his hand, his claws scratching over the thorns Elly had permanently tattooed on her body. She smiled up at him and moved her hips against him.

“Good girl.”

The end.

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# Acknowledgments & About the Author

THE AUTHOR WOULD LIKE to thank, in no particular order, Jay Lee Kage for being a source of constant encouragement, Marie MacKay for an absolutely phenominal cover, Nova for being a good little cheerleader and helping hand on the socials, and everyone on the Driven Paranormal Romance Group and Erotica Promo Group Discord.

As always, you know what you did.

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